APRIL 2009
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"I REMEMBER 715"

35th Anniversary Recollections
Of Hank's Momentous Home Run

ChopTalk

THE OFFICIAL MONTHLY MAGAZINE
OF THE ATLANTA BRAVES

PLUS

Q&A With Javier Vazquez
Position-By-Position Preview
Ken Rosenthal's Predictions
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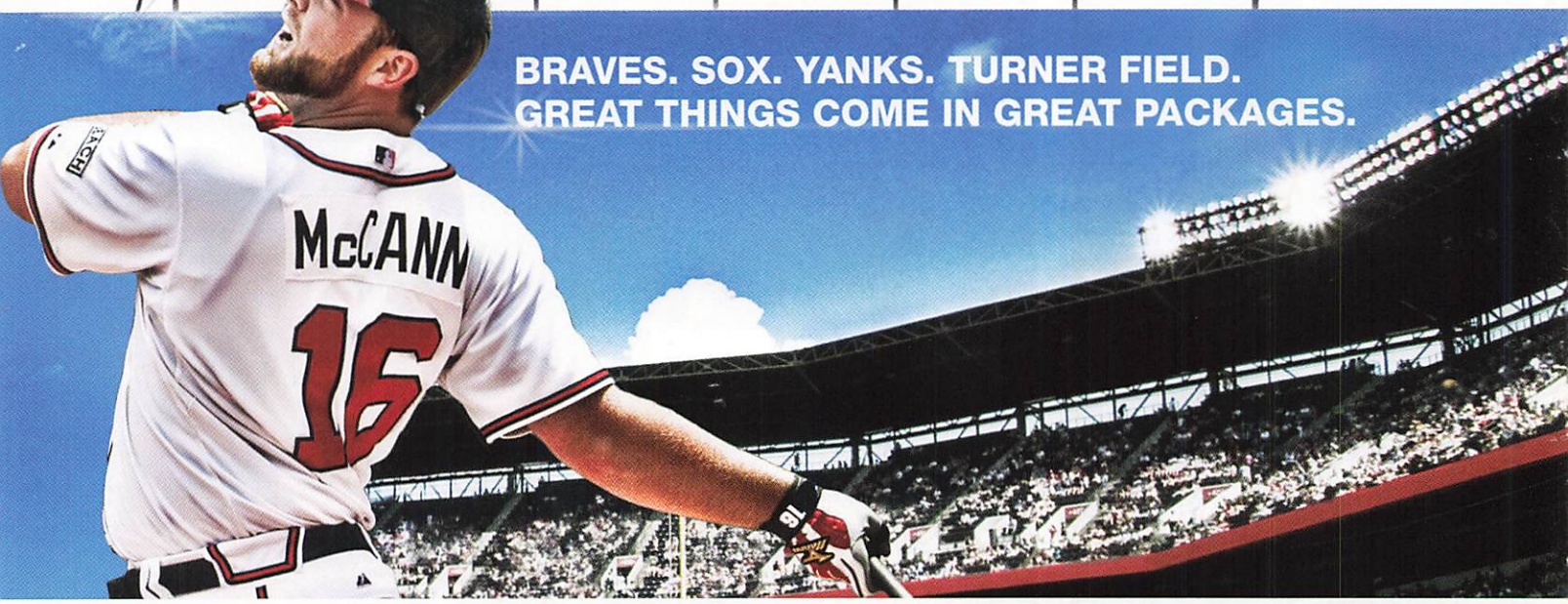
ANGEL IN THE OUTFIELD

Garret Anderson Brings
A Big Bat To Left Field

THE THRILL OF TURNER FIELD



TICKET PACKAGES STARTING AT $49

4-GAME PACKS

SATURDAY PACKAGE

SAT	4/11	Nationals	7:10
SAT	5/23	Blue Jays	7:10
SAT	6/27	Red Sox	4:10
SAT	9/5	Reds	7:10

SUNDAY PACKAGE

SUN	6/28	Red Sox	1:35
SUN	7/19	Mets	6:00
SUN	8/2	Dodgers	1:35
SUN	9/6	Reds	1:35

TUESDAY PACKAGE

TUE	6/23	Yankees	7:10
TUE	6/30	Phillies	7:10
TUE	7/21	Giants	7:10
TUE	9/15	Mets	7:10

WEDNESDAY PACKAGE*

WED	6/3	Cubs	7:10
WED	6/24	Yankees	7:10
WED	8/12	Nationals	7:10
WED	8/26	Padres	7:10

THURSDAY PACKAGE

THUR	6/4	Cubs	7:10
THUR	6/25	Yankees	7:10
THUR	7/16	Mets	7:10
THUR	10/1	Nationals	7:10

EAST COAST FIREWORKS

FRI	6/26	Red Sox	7:35
FRI	8/14	Phillies	7:35
FRI	9/18	Phillies	7:35
FRI	10/2	Nationals	7:35

***Wednesday Outfield Pavilion 2-for-1 $59/seat**

4-GAME PACK PRICES

Terrace Level	$145
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Upper Box	$49

6-GAME PACKS

YANKEES 6-PACK

TUE	6/23	Yankees	7:10
WED	6/24	Yankees	7:10
THUR	6/25	Yankees	7:10
THUR	7/23	Giants	1:10
SUN	8/23	Marlins	1:35
SUN	9/20	Phillies	1:35

RED SOX 6-PACK

FRI	6/26	Red Sox	7:35
SAT	6/27	Red Sox	4:10
SUN	6/28	Red Sox	1:35
SUN	8/16	Phillies	1:35
THUR	8/27	Padres	7:10
THUR	9/17	Mets	7:10

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Braves

BATTING ORDER

APRIL 2009

POWER HITTERS

6-8
"I REMEMBER 715"
35th Anniversary Recollections Of Hank Aaron's Momentous Home Run By Andy Johnston

9
A HOME RUN TO SING ABOUT
Peter Cooper's Ode To Hank Aaron And His 715th Home Run By Gary Caruso

18-19
PLAYING PEPPER
Javier Vazquez Talks About Pitching, Peanut Butter And Puerto Rico Interview By Patty Rasmussen

20-23
FOR STARTERS
Vazquez, Lowe And Kawakami Drive Hope Of Rotation Revival And Post-Season Return By Gary Caruso

24-27
UP FOR GRABS
Phillies, Cubs And Dodgers Look Like Favorites - But (Almost) Anything Is Possible By Ken Rosenthal of Foxsports.com

28-30
ANGEL IN THE OUTFIELD
After 14-Plus Seasons In The American League, Garret Anderson Brings A Big Bat To Left By Ray Glier

34-37
COMING TO AMERICA
The Assimilation Of Kenshin Kawakami Includes Golf, Language Lessons, Jokes And Lots Of Media Attention By Ray Glier

38-40
FLORIDA HIATUS
Players And Their Families Get Creative In Dealing With Challenges Of Spring Training Living By Patty Rasmussen

43
MIDDLE MAN
Speedy Josh Anderson Appears To Have The Edge In Winning Center-Field Job By Mark Bowman of MLB.com

ATLANTA BRAVES

ATLANTA BRAVES

ALLISON SHIRREFFS

COVER CREDITS

JAVIER VAZQUEZ, DEREK LOWE AND KENSHIN KAWAKAMI
by Allison Shirreffs

Garret Anderson: Bill Setliff

Design by Clark Odom

BATTING ORDER

APRIL 2009

SINGLES HITTERS

12-13 SCOREBOARD
14-15 BUNTS & BASEHITS
16-17 OFF THE FIELD
31 BEHIND THE NUMBERS By Steve Fall
54-55 HEROES & HISTORY
Steve Bedrosian's Commitment To His Community Runs Deep By Brian Knapp
56 ALUMNI NOTES
58-59 BEYOND BASEBALL By Patty Rasmussen
60 TALKIN' CHOP
62 XTRA INNINGS
"Project Knuckleball" By Patty Rasmussen

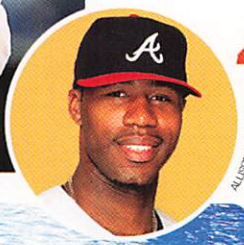
PITCHERS

11 PAINTING THE CORNERS By Jay Busbee
15 FRANK WREN
17 BOBBY COX
37 BATTER UP! By Mike Gonzalez
57 GARY CARUSO
62 JOHNNY SAJEM'S CARTOON

11

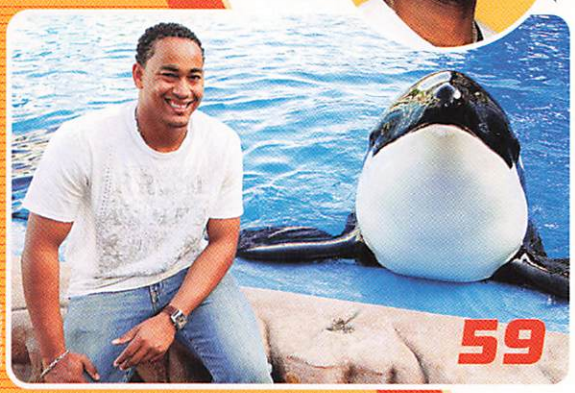
PINCH-HITTERS

49 RADIO NETWORK
50-51 TICKET/TURNER FIELD INFO
52-53 2009 SCHEDULE CALENDAR
55 HOW I MADE IT TO THE MAJORS By Steve Fall
56 BIRTHDAYS



45

ALLISON SHERRETTS



59

ON DECK

44-46 FARM SYSTEM ROUNDUP By Bill Ballew
45 DOWN ON THE FARM By Jason Heyward

VOLUME 5, NUMBER 4

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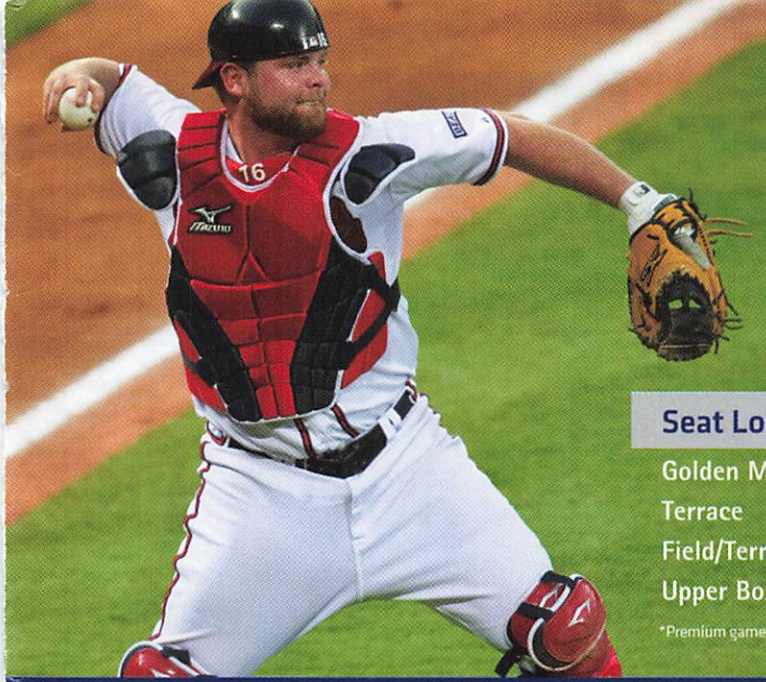

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APRIL

		1	2	3 DET*	4 DET*
5 PHI	6	7 PHI	8 PHI	9	10 WAS	11 WAS
12 WAS	13	14 FLA	15 FLA	16 FLA	17 PIT	18 PIT
19 PIT	20 WAS	21 WAS	22 WAS	23	24 CIN	25 CIN
26 CIN	27 STL	28 STL	29 STL	30		

MAY

					1 HOU	2 HOU
3 HOU	4 NYM	5 NYM	6 FLA	7 FLA	8 PHI	9 PHI
10 PHI	11 NYM	12 NYM	13 NYM	14	15 ARI	16 ARI
17 ARI	18 COL	19 COL	20 COL	21 COL	22 TOR	23 TOR
24 TOR	25 SF	26 SF	27 SF	28 ARI	29 ARI	30 ARI
31 ARI						

JUNE

	1	2 CHI	3 CHI	4 CHI	5 MIL	6 MIL
7 MIL	8 PIT	9 PIT	10 PIT	11 PIT	12 BAL	13 BAL
14 BAL	15	16 CIN	17 CIN	18 CIN	19 BOS	20 BOS
21 BOS	22	23 NYY	24 NYY	25 NYY	26 BOS	27 BOS
28 BOS	29	30 PHI				

JULY

			1 PHI	2 PHI	3 WAS	4 WAS
5 WAS	6 CHI	7 CHI	8 CHI	9 COL	10 COL	11 COL
12 COL	13 ALL STAR GAME ST LOUIS	14	15	16 NYM	17 NYM	18 NYM
19 NYM	20 SF	21 SF	22 SF	23 SF	24 MIL	25 MIL
26 MIL	27	28 FLA	29 FLA	30 FLA	31 LAD	

AUGUST

						1 LAD
2 LAD	3 SD	4 SD	5 SD	6 LAD	7 LAD	8 LAD
9 LAD	10	11 WAS	12 WAS	13	14 PHI	15 PHI
16 PHI	17	18 NYM	19 NYM	20 NYM	21 FLA	22 FLA
23 FLA	24	25 SD	26 SD	27 SD	28 PHI	29 PHI
30 PHI	31 FLA					

SEPT/OCT

		1 FLA	2 FLA	3 FLA	4 CIN	5 CIN
6 CIN	7	8 HOU	9 HOU	10 HOU	11 STL	12 STL
13 STL	14	15 NYM	16 NYM	17 NYM	18 PHI	19 PHI
20 PHI	21 NYM	22 NYM	23 NYM	24	25 WAS	26 WAS
27 WAS	28 FLA	29 FLA	30 FLA	1 WAS	2 WAS	3 WAS
4 WAS						

Away Games ☐ Home Games ☐ *Exhibition Games

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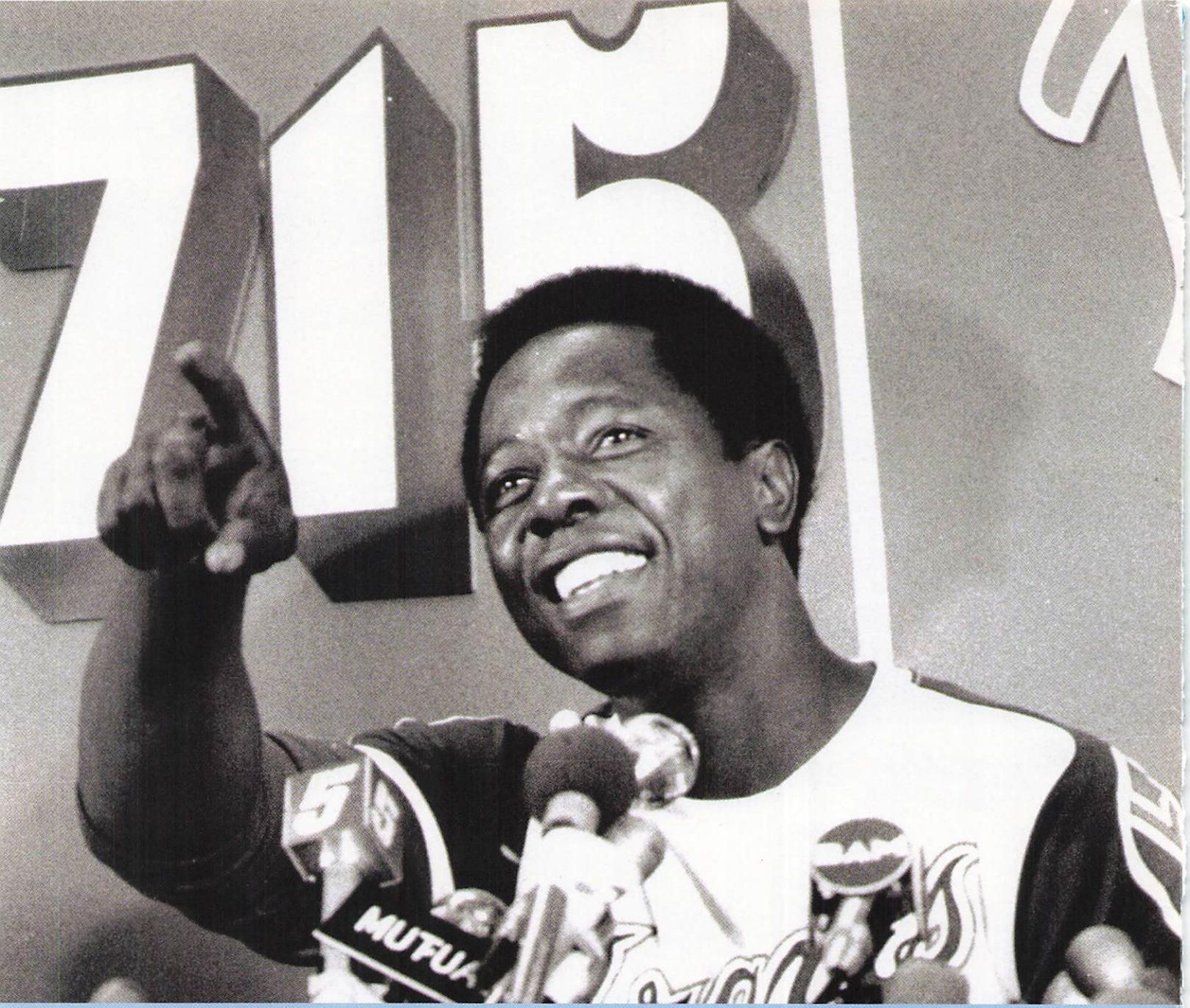


35th Anniversary Recollections Of Hank Aaron's Momentous Home Run

"I REMEMBER 715"

By Andy Johnston

PHOTO: ATLANTA BRAVES

LONG-TIME BRAVES FANS can remember the 1-0 pitch by Dodgers lefthander Al Downing... Hank Aaron's fourth-inning swing, his first of the season at home (he walked on five pitches in the second inning)... and the thoughts that flowed through their heads, wondering if the ball would clear the left-field fence at what then was called simply Atlanta Stadium.

They remember almost everything about that night of April 8, 1974, when Aaron hit his 715th home run to surpass the career record of Babe Ruth that many thought would stand forever.

As the 35th anniversary of that historic occasion approaches, here are a few memories from some of the 53,775 fans who were in attendance and from some who didn't have that privilege of being there but have recollections of that night.

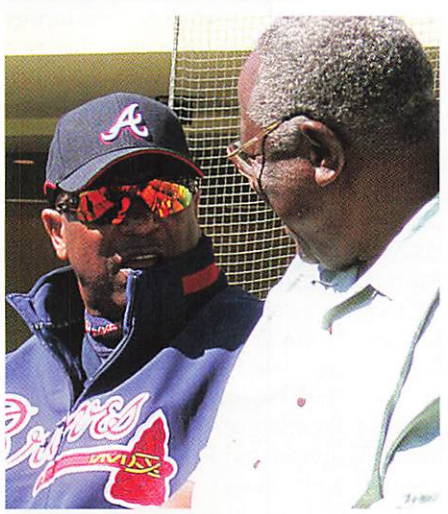
JIMMY CARTER

39TH PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, 1977-1981

"We, Rosalynn and myself, were at the game and watched Hank hit it. We were excited to be there and then when he hit it. I cheered and waved my arms and tried to get on the field as fast as I could. I (Georgia governor at the time) had prepared in advance a license plate that said 'HLA 715' and gave it to him in a ceremony after the game. The Atlanta Chamber of Commerce had bought him a new Cadillac and I gave him a license plate to go on it. My picture giving him the license plate was in the Encyclopedia Britannica. That Cadillac cost $13,000 and that license plate cost me 10 bucks, and I received the most publicity. It was an honor to be there. It was a notable achievement for a superb athlete who was modest and confident. He set such a moral example for young people. He was under a lot of pressure. There were a lot of racists who thought it was improper that a black man would surpass a record set by Babe Ruth. Hank excelled on his own merits."

TERRY PENDLETON

1991 NATIONAL LEAGUE MVP AND BATTING CHAMP/ BRAVES HITTING COACH



ALLISON SHIRREFFS

"We were out of school and I was at the park across the street from my house playing hoops. I suddenly remembered the game was on and ran in from the park in just enough time to sit down and see Aaron coming up to the plate. Al Downing was pitching and I actually got to witness it, 715th home run. There's no doubt it was an incredible moment to get to see. Everyone wants to see history being made, and I was a baseball fan, even though at the time it was my second sport to basketball. Seeing that moment is something that every baseball fan, and even people who weren't fans, would want to see: a man of color holding the home run king record. I was just glad I had the opportunity to see it and I'm glad (the Braves) were playing the Dodgers because if they hadn't been, I wouldn't have seen it. I was in the right city at the right time, and I remembered at the right time. If it had been five minutes later, I would have missed it.

I never thought anyone would break Hank's record. It was so meaningful to meet him. The other day when he sat up on the bench behind the batting cage and talked with me, I was like a kid in the candy store. It makes you think back to those days when you ran across the street from the park just to see this man swing the bat. Just to have that time with him is a highlight of my career. People talk about his accomplishments in the game, his home runs, but if you look at his stats, he was one of the best all-around ballplayers that ever played."

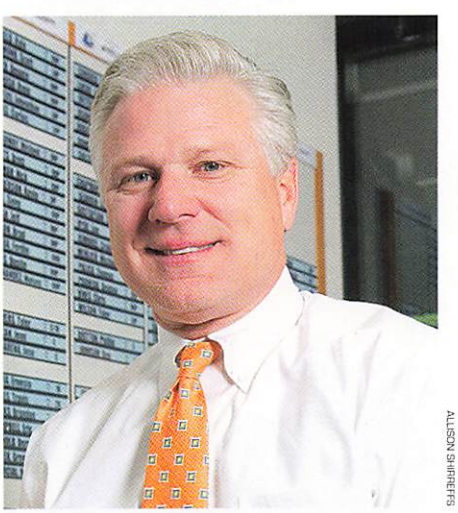
TOM HOUSE

BRAVES RELIEVER, 1971-75/UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA PITCHING COACH

"It was a much anticipated event, so all the bullpen guys from late 1973 into spring training and into the 1974 season staked out our own territories behind the (left-field) fence if Henry broke the record in Atlanta. We each had about 10-yard territories, with the veteran relievers closer to the left-field foul line, where Henry hit most of his home runs. Myself and Buzz Capra were the youngest guys, so I was in left center and he was almost in center field. We were in our territories in anticipation of the home run moment. He hit the ball and it was coming right at me. It was like playing catch as a kid. All I had to do is reach up and catch the ball. People have said it was a great catch, but if I had stood still, it would have hit me in the forehead. The only things that I could see was somebody with a fishing net, swishing it back and forth from the stands and (Dodgers leftfielder) Bill Buckner climbing the fence. The next thing I remember is standing at home plate and handing the ball to him. I said, 'Here it is, Hammer.' He said, 'Thanks, kid.' And he took it from me. I remember he had a tear on his cheek and he was hugging his mom. I later found out she was hugging him because she thought someone was going to shoot him. I remember that tear and his emotion that night because he always played with his emotions in check. I got pushed out of the way and the night went on, but that was the highlight of my professional playing career. I got to go into the Hall of Fame with Hank Aaron."

FRANK WREN

BRAVES GENERAL MANAGER



ALLISON SHIRREFFS

"I was a shortstop on the JV baseball team at Northeast High School in St. Petersburg, Fla. That night I was in our family room watching the game with my

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

dad. The Braves were carried by WTOG, channel 44 in those days, and everyone in St Pete followed them."

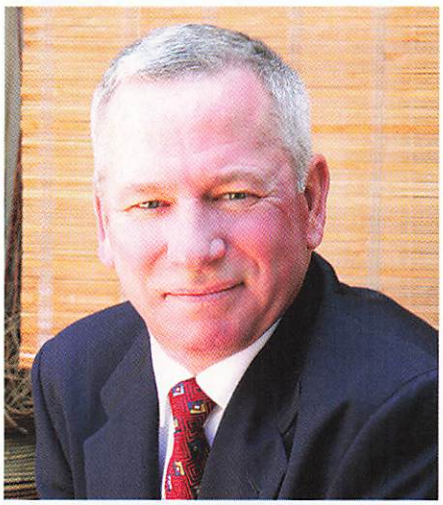
DAVID BARBE

Record Producer/Athens, Ga.

"I grew up in Atlanta, and in April, 1974, I was 10 years old, and a baseball fanatic. As you might imagine, Hank Aaron's pursuit of Ruth's record was all-encompassing to me. I read everything about him that I could, and became a fan of the man as well as the player. There was something about Aaron's quiet dignity that appealed to me much more than, say, Reggie's (Jackson) bravado. On April 8, the Braves and Dodgers were playing a Monday night game in Atlanta. Our TV was a small black and white set on the kitchen counter. I watched the game there with my mom. I remember seeing Bill Buckner try to scale the wall. At the time, the broadcasters' impression was that Buckner was such a gamer that he was trying to rob the homer. Not exactly true, though. Later, Buckner and Jimmy Wynn revealed that they had a plan, where whoever was closer to the ball would jump the fence and get the ball and toss it to the other one, and they would split the prize money. Hard to imagine players today caring that much for $500, which I think was the amount. Anyway, that moment was the most exciting moment in professional sports in my memory as a fan. One of my sons is named Henry."

DONN BLEAU

Businessman/San Diego, Calif.



SPECIAL

"I had been a Hank Aaron fan since the 1957 World Series, and actually met him a couple of times, including once in Cincinnati in 1971. On the night he hit 715, we were at the Lakeview Hotel in Averill Park, New York. It had a bowling alley in the back and a blue-collar bar. It was in a blue-collar area. I was there with a friend, Matt Graves, and most of the people there were interested in Aaron's chase. I remember watching the entire game there. The sound was up, and I remember seeing the ball hit. I wasn't sure if it was going to go out or not until I saw Bill Buckner jumping up and Tom House catching it. It was a big darn deal."

DALE MURPHY

Braves Hall of Famer, 1976-1990

TYNA DUCKETT

"I was a senior in high school. I was in our backyard for some reason, and I remember waiting to see a replay of the game later that night. There was going to be a special broadcast or something. My mom heard the news about Hank passing Babe Ruth, and ran out and told me. I watched the replay over and over. Later that June, much to my surprise, I would be drafted by the Braves."

VINCE DOOLEY

Retired University of Georgia Football Coach/ Athletic Director

"I have a lot of special memories of him. We're both from the same hometown (Mobile, Alabama). I guess you could say we're both from the wrong side of the tracks, just different tracks. So I have a special affection for him. We've had him over for (Georgia football) games, and he gave me a ball that I still have. I always followed his career. I remember being more than thrilled when (he hit No. 715). I remember those two (fans) running around the bases with him, and him just taking it in stride, just like he always does."

DAVID MARANISS

Pulitzer Prize-Winning Journalist/Best-Selling Author

"My memories are not precise. I was in Madison, Wisconsin, at the time, and I know I watched on TV. I think I was with my 4-year-old son, Andrew. I remember clearly two things - that lefthander Al Downing was the pitcher and that I was thinking about how I had seen him pitch in New York at Yankee Stadium at the start of his career in the early 1960s, and here he was at the end. And I remember how odd it was that Tom House caught the ball in the bullpen. And I remember feeling badly that two idiots, drunk or egotistical, ran out onto the field in pursuit of Aaron and sullied the moment. My strongest feeling, though, came later, and it was a sense that people would remember Aaron for that trot around the bases as an old man instead of as the swift, agile, beautiful ballplayer he was for so much of his career. I never liked Babe Ruth, or the Yankees, and I loved Henry Aaron. So, I was thrilled that he got the record."

JOHNNY TALLANT

Past President, Braves 400 Club

"My wife Susan and I had been attending opening nights for several years with our friends, Jerry and Renae Hogan, and on this night - I remember a lot of traffic and we actually missed the first inning. We were in our seats down the left-field line in the upper deck when Hank hit the famous home run. I remember wishing I had better seats as we normally did. I saved the flyer they gave us saying you were there for 715. Later during 2003, when I was president of the Braves 400 Club, I was able to get Mr. Aaron to autograph that paper as he attended our banquet that year along with former President Carter. That was a great memory, being able to sit on stage with those two gentlemen. The game was certainly the most memorable game I ever attended until Game 6 of the 1995 World Series."

JOHN SCHUERHOLZ

Braves President/ Former General Manager

"I was an assistant farm director for the Kansas City Royals in 1974, so I was watching it on TV when Hank hit his home run to break Ruth's record. It was a thrilling moment. Even though Babe Ruth was a fellow Baltimorean and I thought his record would stand forever, watching Hank's career unfold, watching him play in such a consistent fashion, it was easy to want him to do well."

A HOME RUN TO SING ABOUT

Peter Cooper is too young to remember Hank Aaron actually hitting career home run No. 715. But he was inspired by it nonetheless.

Cooper is a 38-year-old singer-songwriter based in Nashville whose "715 (For Hank Aaron)" is a well-written and smooth-sounding tribute to that memorable moment in Braves and American history. Among other things, the song is a biographical synopsis of Aaron's life and also speaks to the racial bigotry he faced in breaking what was regarded as the greatest record in sports.

The son of a Methodist minister, Cooper grew up in the South, spending more of his childhood in Spartanburg, S.C., than in any other place. He also frequently visited relatives in Atlanta, often attending Braves games at Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium.

"I remember waiting for my grandmother at a beauty salon," recalled Cooper, relating a story that's actually part of the lyrics to the full version of the song. "I was wearing a Braves t-shirt, and a woman asked me who my favorite player was. I told her, 'Hank Aaron.' She said it was 'too bad he got that record' and that it looked like 'they aren't going to let us keep anything to ourselves.'

"It was my first experience with overt prejudice and the first sports memory that I can recall."

Cooper usually performs "715" during concerts and shows. His appearance schedule can be found at petercoopermusic.com.

"I've played it at concerts in Germany, the Netherlands and England," he said. "I didn't know if a song about baseball would work there, but in Germany, people kept asking about it. They want to hear the story, because they are intrigued by the story of Hank Aaron and the notion that what should have been a time of joy and celebration for him instead was a problematic part of his life that was full of sadness and angst."

The full version of "715" is 6 minutes, 23 seconds long. Following are the lyrics from an abbreviated version. The full version, part of Cooper's album "Mission Door", can be downloaded at iTunes.com, and all of his music can be purchased at redbeetrecords.com and other online sites. Visit petercoopermusic.com for more about the artist and his music.

- GARY CARUSO

SPECIAL

715 (FOR HANK AARON)

(PETER COOPER) WELL KNOWN MUSIC/SESAC/ADMIN. BY BUG MUSIC

Dice games ending with the flash of a blade
All in the wrists if you want to get paid
Daddy sold beer at the Black Cat lounge
Sold a little shine until the man came around

Little boy walkin' through a place like that
Hitting bottle caps with a broomstick bat
Skinny 'cause there wasn't much of nothing to eat
Walkin' through the mud 'cause there wasn't any street

This was Alabama, down the bay
Whole world looking off the other way
Henry Aaron was looking for a reason to dream
In '47 when a black man signed with a big league team

Jim Crow smilin' while the sun beat down
On a sandlot field on the wrong side of town
He took it all in stride
Striding to the ball
Turn of the wrists
Crack, jog and touch 'em all

Ten years later, still playing the game
Stands full of people screaming his name
Won the pennant for the Braves with a four base knock
Same day they were rioting in Little Rock

Up in old Milwaukee he was MVP
Back in Alabama he was still not free
Not free to drink a beer in the white folk's lounge
Not free to have a memeal in Mobile, downtown

Young man rising from the hard hot South
Speaking his mind with a bat and not his mouth
Holdin' it inside
Striding to the ball
Turn of the wrists
Crack, jog and touch 'em all

(interlude, where I tell you why I care so much about sports)

Dice games ending with the flash of a blade
All in the wrists if you want to get paid
Daddy sold beer at the Black Cat lounge
Sold a little shine until the man came around

Little boy walkin' through a place like that
Hitting bottlecaps with a broomstick bat
Skinny 'cause there wasn't much of nothing to eat
Walkin' through the mud 'cause there wasn't any street

That was Alabama, down the bay
Whole world looking off the other way
Henry Aaron was looking for a reason to dream
When the dream came true, that's when the world got really mean

He opened up death threats in the mail
'Cause he was taking a hammer to a great white whale
Had no place to hide
Striding to the ball
Turn of the wrists
Crack, jog and touch 'em all

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a child in your community from a life of food insecurity. You can help by making a donation to the Atlanta Community Food Bank. www.ACFB.org
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PAINTING THE CORNERS

BY JAY BUSBEE

HERE'S THE 2009 SEASON IN A NUTSHELL

WELCOME to the latest version of my pre-season predictions, my fearless take on how the 2009 season will play out. I've done this the last few years in this column, and let's just say I don't exactly have a sterling record. (I've picked the Braves to win the World Series three years in a row.) Hey, you want true statistical analysis, look elsewhere. But if you want to see how the season ought to play out, read on …

APRIL 10 - With the Braves' outfield rotation still in flux, Bobby Cox turns to some unconventional means of determining how Jordan Schafer, Josh Anderson, Matt Diaz, Gregor Blanco and Garret Anderson will fit into the crowded Turner Field outfield. He uses reality-show challenges – stilt fights, cooking contests, trivia – to determine his roster. But much to the dismay of female Braves fans, he abandons plans for a seventh-inning-stretch swimsuit competition.

MAY 20 - The division rival Florida Marlins unveil their 2009 slogan: "Catch us before our next fire sale!"

MAY 1 - Chipper Jones begins his, "You Should Have Signed With the Braves" Vengeance Tour by hammering two homers off the Astros' Mike Hampton. Later in the year, he'll go 5-for-5 against the Yankees' A.J. Burnett, send the Padres' Jake Peavy to the showers in the first inning, catch everything off the bat of the Dodgers' Rafael Furcal, and make Ken Griffey Jr. cry with scary midnight phone calls.

MAY 6 - Sick and tired of all the injuries that beset his team last year, Frank Wren orders every Braves player covered in bubble wrap and preserved in a hyperbaric chamber between games. A certain former Brave now pitching for the Astros laughs at the idea, but tears a rib muscle and ends up on the disabled list for six weeks.

MAY 13 - Highly-touted pitcher Tommy Hanson makes his major league debut, accompanied by the harmonies of a choir of angels as he walks to the mound. The ball glows in his hand between pitches. He strikes out 14 straight batters en route to a shutout. (You laugh, but when this comes true, remember where you heard it first.)

ATLANTA BRAVES

Once again, Buddy Carlyle can be counted on to deliver whatever the Braves need - on the mound or off!

JUNE 2 - In keeping with his kinder, gentler approach to the game, Bobby Cox brings flowers and candy out to umpires every time he argues a call. In return for his consideration, the umpires allow Bobby to sit in a recliner while he makes his case.

JUNE 11 - Inspired by former teammate Javy Lopez's creation of a new bat company, Sid Bream creates "Sid Slid" pants, greased and rubberized pants that can help even the slowest runner scoot around the bases that much faster. Braves players who try the pants report a constant desire to score from second, even on infield popouts.

JUNE 15 - The Phillies unveil their new slogan: "2008 World Champions. Really. We won it! What, you don't remember? We did!"

JUNE 26 - The Red Sox come to town. John Smoltz sleeps in his own bed, drives to Turner Field, dresses in the Braves locker room, and throws two innings of shutout ball *against* Boston before anyone says, "Hey, wait a second… "

JULY 6 - Buddy Carlyle continues to demonstrate why he's the most valuable utility pitcher on the team. Not only does he pitch in the starting rotation, in long relief, and in save situations, but he also doles out financial advice, cooks a mean pot of clubhouse chili, performs some Turner Field ligament-replacement surgery, and, in a pinch, drives the Braves' bus during a road trip to Chicago.

JULY 11 - The Nationals unveil their new slogan: "We're like a stimulus package for your won-lost record!"

JULY 21 - Derek Lowe, Kenshin Kawakami and Jair Jurrjens throw three consecutive shutouts. The next day marks a historic occurrence: News articles and websites compare these pitchers to the glory trio of Smoltz, Maddux and Glavine.

AUG. 1 - So confident is Jeff Francoeur in his newfound hand-eye coordination that he requests opposing pitchers throw golf balls rather than baseballs. In the dugout between at-bats, Francoeur smacks flies and gnats out of the humid Atlanta summer air with his Louisville Slugger.

SEPT. 4 - The Mets unveil their new slogan: "There's no way we can collapse three years in a row."

SEPT. 5 - The Mets collapse.

OCT. 4 - Behind a team of old (Jones) and new (Hanson), stalwarts (Brian McCann) and newcomers (Lowe), the Braves fight their way back into the playoffs for the first time since 2005. And once there, the national media blows the dust off some old clichés – the dominant rotation, the many post-season failures, the lack of attendance. But since almost all the 2009 Braves weren't on the team – or even in the country – in 2005, they don't know the script they're supposed to follow, and proceed to…

…Ah, but that would be telling. Let's just see how it plays out, shall we?

THE INVASION OF EUROPE

SPAIN IS NOT THE FIRST country that comes to mind when the topic is international baseball. However, that situation could change in the foreseeable future.

The Braves became the first team in the major leagues to establish an academy in Europe with the opening of a facility in Tenerife, Spain, on Feb. 22.

Working in conjunction with the Royal Spanish Federation of Baseball and Softball, Johnny Almaraz, Jose Martinez and Jose Tartabull were among members of the Braves organization to christen what is expected to be the team's European headquarters.

"Many of the people in Europe are just learning baseball, and it's to our advantage to begin this program at this time," said Almaraz, the Braves' director of international scouting & operations. "The Spanish Federation is just as excited as we are. They wanted a relationship with the Atlanta Braves."

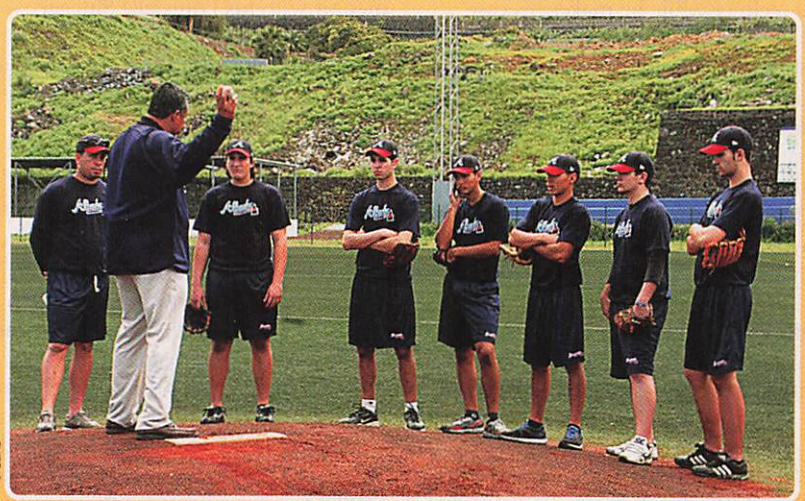
SPECIAL

The first class at the Braves' new academy in Tenerife, Spain, poses before a banner that lends local flavor to the first such venture by an MLB franchise on the continent of Europe.

Spain has one of the most open and flexible labor markets in the world, as well as Europe's best-performing major economy. In addition, persons of Spanish descent can move to and become legal citizens of Spain. That has led to hundreds of thousands of people from Latin America, including Cuba, Venezuela, Colombia and the Dominican Republic, immigrating and bringing the baseball culture with them.

"Soccer remains the number one sport on the mainland, but along the Canary Islands, where our facility is located, baseball is becoming more and more popular because of the immigrants," Almaraz said. "But even on the mainland, in cities such as Barcelona and Madrid, there are thousands of players in club leagues."

Owned by the Spanish Federation, the facility includes a modern field with dugouts, artificial surface, and seating for spectators. Approximately 200 feet from the field is a resort hotel, which provides the players with room and board. Nestor Perez, who manages the academy and handles Atlanta's scouting of European prospects, coaches the Braves team that includes 25 players who compete against three amateur teams based on the islands.



SPECIAL

Johnny Almaraz, the Braves' director of international scouting & operations, gives pitching tips to some of the prospects at the new academy, the first of its kind in Europe.

Martinez, Atlanta's assistant director of international scouting, played an important role in forging the union with Spanish officials. A delegation of Braves and Major League Baseball representatives are scheduled to return July 13-25 and Dec. 5-13.

"The Braves are the type of organization that is committed to player development at the grass roots level," Almaraz said. "That's why we're in Spain. We have our eyes on several kids over there, and I predict it won't be long before some of them are competing for us in the United States."

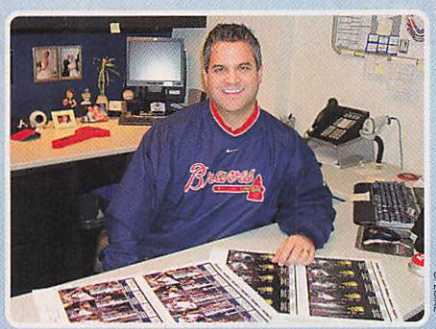
- BILL BALLEW

HOW DO THEY DO THAT?

PRINT SEASON TICKETS

ABOUT TWO WEEKS before Opening Day comes a special time for thousands of Braves fans. That's when a package arrives filled with their season tickets.

The process to get those tickets printed starts several months earlier, as soon as the previous regular season ends. Blue Sky, the team's advertising agency, meets with the Braves marketing department to discuss design ideas. Blue Sky then develops images and graphics for four or five ticket examples. After the Braves select one of them, any changes and minor tweaks are made. The design receives final approval by the first week of January.


SPECIAL

Images for the tickets are transferred through the internet to Weldon, Williams and Lick (WW&L), a Fort Smith, Arkansas-based company that prints season tickets for the Braves and other major league clubs. Anthony Esposito (above), the Braves' assistant director of ticket operations, generates a print file for WW&L filled with data from the team's ticketing system. This includes the seat location and barcode for every game ticket.

After all this information is loaded on computers and merged, WW&L sends Esposito back some test files. He checks that the tickets' barcodes – which provide access at Turner Field's entry gates – scan properly before WW&L starts production.

"In mid-February, we'll send them all of our season ticket files that are paid up to that point," said Esposito. "Then they'll start generating the tickets. It takes them about three to four weeks of production to generate all of our tickets."

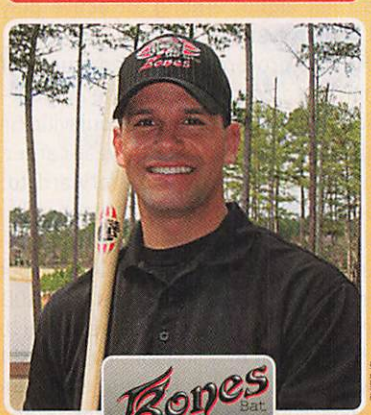
The Braves have approximately 4,000 season ticket accounts, which average from two to three individuals. Once printed, WWL separates the tickets and puts them into books. Some fans also receive parking passes bundled with them. Everything gets packaged and delivered to season ticketholders, usually in mid-March.

- STEVE FALL

BAT MAN

FORMER BRAVES CATCHER Javy Lopez (1992-2003) hearkened back to a time-honored baseball tradition when selecting the name "Bones," for his start-up bat company.

"I settled on 'Bones' because players used to rub a piece of bone to make the wooden bat stronger and harder," he said. "Plus the logo is a baseball skull. I thought, 'What better name than 'Bones?' And it sounded kind of cool."



SPECIAL

Lopez, 38, was in Orlando during spring training in early March, talking to players about his product - maple and ash bats manufactured in Ridgeway, Illinois, and bearing the distinctive Bones logo. Lopez personally selects the wood used in the manufacturing process.

"I took about 40 bats for the players to try," he said. "I was also taking models from them. I got bats from Jeff Francoeur, Brian McCann and Yunel Escobar. I'll give them to the manufacturer, and they'll make some sample bats to their exact specifications."

He also took bat orders from three other players - Chipper Jones, Omar Infante and Martin Prado.

Bones bats come in four MLB-approved colors - a crimson or reddish stain, brown, black and Lopez's personal favorite, natural.

"I always liked to have natural bats when I played, with as little grain showing as possible," he said. "Our natural bat, with a black handle and the black and red logo on it, is stunning."

A unique feature of the bats is the colored logo, which is chosen according to the team colors. For example, a black bat going to an Oakland A's player would be embossed with a silver skull logo with green stripes.

The skull motif in the logo is a tribute to one of Lopez's favorite hobbies, riding motorcycles.

"I wanted to combine cycle feel into my logo, and you see a lot of skulls in motorcycling stuff," he said. "I put together two things I love to do the most - riding motorcycles and playing baseball."

Lopez drew the original logo the day he was released by the Colorado Rockies in 2007. The "B" in Bones is made from the first letter of his name - "J" - and the uniform number he wore - 8. His failed comeback attempt with the Braves last spring temporarily shelved his business plan. After he retired, he decided to pursue the bat company concept and took his drawing to a professional tattoo artist.

"He made it even better," said Lopez.

- PATTY RASMUSSEN

PLAY BALL!

ATLANTA BRAVES

THE BRAVES will host the Washington Nationals in the Home Opener on Friday, April 10, at 7:30 p.m. (Peachtree TV). Atlanta will be trying to break a two-game losing streak in home openers. Overall, they are 21-22 in home openers since moving to Atlanta in 1966.

The Season Opener is Sunday, April 5, at Philadelphia against the defending World Champion Phillies. Game time is listed as 8 p.m., and it will be shown on ESPN2. Atlanta plays three games in four days in Philadelphia before returning home for an off day and their Turner Field debut.

See pages 52-53 of this issue for the complete schedule calendar, including TV listings. Ticket information can be found on pages 50-51.

After the April 10 Home Opener, fans will be treated to a Publix Friday Night Fireworks show. Additionally, the first 45,000 fans on Friday and Saturday night (April 11, 7 p.m.) will receive a Braves magnetic schedule, courtesy of Georgia Power. After the Sunday game (April 12, 1:30 p.m.), all fans 14 and under are invited to run the bases.

The Braves will begin their 13th season at Turner Field, where they are 6-6 in home openers, Friday, April 10, at 7:30 p.m. against Washington.

GLAVINE'S BACK

The Braves announced Feb. 20 that they agreed to terms with **Tom Glavine** on a one-year contract. Glavine, who became a free agent at the end of last season, is working his way back from left elbow and shoulder surgery last Aug. 21 and is expected to fill the No. 5 slot in the rotation. He has 305 career wins (244 as a Brave) and two Cy Young Awards (1991 and '98 with Atlanta) to his credit. He pitched an 8-inning 1-hitter to beat Cleveland in decisive Game 6 of the 1995 World Series, earning Series MVP honors. He turned 43 on Mar. 25 and is the fourth-winningest lefthander in history. Glavine arrived at spring training Mar. 4. He wasn't scheduled to make his regular season debut until April 19, and as the fifth starter, will make just two starts in April.

WELCOME!

The Braves announced Feb. 24 that they signed free-agent outfielder **Garret Anderson** to a one-year contract. He will wear uniform No. 18. A three-time American League All-Star and the MVP of the 2003 All-Star Game, Anderson comes to the Braves with a .296 lifetime batting average, 272 career home runs and 1,292 RBIs in 2,013 games. His 489 career doubles rank eighth among all active players and 56th in history.

"He is a proven winner and true professional," said Frank Wren of the 36-year-old Anderson who has won two Louisville Silver Slugger Awards during a 15-year career, all with the Angels. "We look forward to his veteran leadership and his presence in our lineup."

Anderson has batted .300 or better seven times and has struck out 100 or more times just once. He has never batted below .280 in a season. He got off to a slow start with the Braves, suffering a strained right calf muscle Mar. 6 during pre-game warmups. He was expected to miss at least two to three weeks.

WORLD TRAVELERS

Chipper Jones and **Brian McCann** left spring training camp Mar. 1 to play for Team USA in the World Baseball Classic (WBC). They could be gone as long as Mar. 24, the day after the WBC championship game at Dodger Stadium.

Chipper suffered a mild strain of the right oblique muscle Mar. 8 when taking a big swing in a game against Venezuela. He expected to miss about a week. Team USA trained in Clearwater, Fla., and played first-round games in Toronto, advancing to the second round in Miami.

Four other Braves playing in the WBC are **Javier Vazquez** (Puerto Rico), **Gregor Blanco** (Venezuela), **Manny Acosta** (Panama) and **Jorge Campillo** (Mexico). **Jair Jurrjens** declined an opportunity to pitch for The Netherlands so he could prepare for the season.

QUICK RECOVERY

Peter Moylan, who had **Tommy John** surgery last May 8, appeared on track for a possible return to the Atlanta roster as early as Opening Night, which would be a month ahead of schedule. It normally takes at least 12 months for a complete recovery. Moylan worked an inning against the Phillies Mar. 1 at Disney's Wide World of Sports complex. It was the first time he pitched in a game since last April 11. Though he allowed one run and two hits,

Moylan reported no pain in spite of being less than 10 months removed from surgery.

LOOK WHO'S PITCHING

Chipper Jones threw out the ceremonial first pitch at Stetson University's season-opener Feb. 20 in DeLand, Fla., where he was born. Chipper is a member of Stetson's Trustee Athletic Committee and hosts the department's single largest fundraising event each year - the Chipper Jones Celebrity Golf Invitational. Chipper's Family Foundation has made significant contributions to Stetson athletics. He's also the major donor in the development of the DeLand Little League and Pierson Little League complexes, both of which bear his name.

SHORT HOPS

- **Chipper Jones** and the Braves reportedly are discussing a contract extension. His current contract expires at the end of the season, potentially making him eligible for free agency.

- **Kelly Johnson** and **Jeff Francoeur** both reached agreement on one-year contracts, thus avoiding salary arbitration. The Braves had no arbitration cases.

- The Braves released righthander **Anthony Lerew** Mar. 10 in their first round of spring cuts. He had elbow surgery in June 2007. Since the Braves didn't have a spot for him in the majors or at Triple-A, they wanted to give him time to try to find another club, according to **Frank Wren**. The Braves previously outrighted Lerew to make room for **Tom Glavine** on the 40-man roster.

- There were reports during spring training that **Ken Griffey Jr.** would sign with the Braves, but he returned to Seattle instead.

- The Braves announced Mar. 2 that they agreed to terms with 10 players on one-year contracts, bringing all players on the 40-man roster under contract. The 10 players included pitchers **Manny Acosta**, **Jeff Bennett**, **Blaine Boyer**, **Buddy Carlyle**, **Jorge Campillo**, **Charlie Morton** and **Peter Moylan**; infielders **Yunel Escobar** and **Martin Prado**; and outfielder **Gregor Blanco**.

FRANK WREN
GENERAL MANAGER

OUR LINEUP'S STRENGTH IS TOP-TO-BOTTOM DEPTH

WITH OPENING DAY APPROACHING, I think there's a lot of excitement about our team. It started back in the winter when we were able to add three pieces to the starting rotation - Derek Lowe, Javier Vazquez and Kenshin Kawakami - that we felt were important to have a successful season. It continued to build with the way our guys pitched during spring training.

I think four of the five teams in our division are in position to be in the race for a long time. That's us, the Mets, the Phillies and the Marlins, due to their young pitching that is always a wild card. But I feel all four could be right in it.

Garret Anderson gives us one more professional hitter that can help extend the lineup. That's so big when you look at a lineup that we think will be able manufacture runs. We may not have a big power hitter, a 40-home-run-plus guy, but we have a number of guys that can hit 20 or more home runs and drive in 85 to 100 runs. The strength of the lineup is depth, and Garret really adds to that.

We felt it would be an ideal situation all winter to sign Tom Glavine after his surgery, because he felt so good. It's the best he'd felt in years during rehabilitation. To have a veteran like that to plug the fifth spot in the rotation is ideal.

Not only can he teach the young guys a lot, but if Tommy is back to where he was before he was hurt, he can be a big help to our club. He pitched some great games for us last year, but he just didn't get much support.

Overall, we played very well in the spring, and that adds to the optimism and excitement. Even our young players that we invited to camp really played well and opened a lot of people's eyes around baseball. It looks to be a bright future for those players and for us as an organization.

> "I THINK FOUR OF THE FIVE TEAMS IN OUR DIVISION ARE IN POSITION TO BE IN THE RACE FOR A LONG TIME."

Tommy Hanson came into camp and was just as advertised. In his first chance to face major league hitters, he did exactly what he did in the minors. He was able to stay ahead in the count and get them out, and he looks like he could be a top-of-the-rotation pitcher in the future.

Jason Heyward and Freddie Freeman, both 19-year-olds in their first major league camp, have been tremendous. They performed well, and they handled themselves well. The veteran players were very impressed by them.

Jordan Schafer also opened a lot of eyes. With all he had to go through last year, he came into camp a more mature person, and his game has matured in a positive way, too. He really played well and has a chance to be the starting centerfielder.

Another young player who really looked good is Diory Hernandez, an infielder who just kept racking up quality at-bats. He really knows how to hit. He batted .320 as an everyday shortstop in the Dominican, and that isn't easy to do.

Matt Diaz started slow but then really turned it on and locked it in pretty well. He lost 20 pounds, and regardless of how things play out in left field with him and the others, it speaks very well of our bench.

Because of the World Baseball Classic and injuries, our bench guys have gotten a lot more playing time, and they've shown well. Omar Infante, Martin Prado, David Ross, Greg Norton and Diaz are all guys who will be counted on to play from time to time and to get big pinch-hits. They looked very good, and I think they give us a bench that's as good as any in baseball.

Chipper had an injury at the WBC. We're clearly a better team with him in the lineup, and getting 135 to 140 games out of him would be a big boost.

Both Rafael Soriano and Peter Moylan have thrown real well, which is a big positive. Moylan hasn't missed a beat. Mike Gonzalez has looked stronger each time out. So, we're very pleased with things on that front.

MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL PHOTOS

WHEN NO. 10 = NO. 7

CHIPPER JONES, who wears uniform No. 10, helped give the famed Top 10 List on Late Night with **David Letterman**, Mar. 5. The only twist was that he delivered No. 7 of the Top 10 Reasons to Watch the World Baseball Classic. And it was:

"The winning team plays Neptune's team in the Galactic Baseball Classic."

Other members of Team USA helping with the gag, performed in uniform and on field, not in the New York studio, were **Derek Jeter** (Yankees), **David Wright** (Mets), **Ryan Braun** (Brewers), **Jimmy Rollins** (Phillies), **Dustin Pedroia** and **Kevin Youklis** (Red Sox), **Curtis Granderson** (Tigers), **Roy Oswalt** (Astros) and **Adam Dunn** (Nationals).

Chipper Jones broke into standup comedy on Late Night with David Letterman when he and other members of Team USA delivered the Top 10 Reasons to Watch the World Baseball Classic.

HEY, COACH!

The deadline is May 31 to nominate youth baseball or softball coaches for the Community Coach Award sponsored by the Braves and Piedmont Hospital. Those who provide superior levels of leadership on the field and in the community are eligible and can be nominated at braves.com/communitycoach. Three metro Atlanta coaches will be awarded $1,000 grants for equipment, uniforms, or field improvements for their baseball or softball team or league. Submission forms are also available by calling (404) 614-1512. Award winners will be recognized in a special pre-game ceremony with a Braves player or coach at a home game during the 2009 season. Individuals submitting a nomination will receive a special 2 for 1 Braves ticket offer.

ON THE AIR

The Braves and Clear Channel announced that 2009 Braves games will be aired on Project 9-6-1 (96.1-FM) while continuing on 640 WGST. The previous two seasons, games were on their sister station, 94.9 The Bull. Clear Channel also will air 52 Braves games on VIVA 105.7, broadcasting every Sunday and Tuesday game in Spanish. See page 49 of this issue for the local stations in the Braves Radio Network throughout an eight-state region.

ALL-STAR STUDENTS

The Braves and Chick-fil-A are teaming to reward students for academic excellence with the All-Star Student Achievers Program. Students in grades K-12 who achieved Straight A's, Honor Roll, or Perfect Attendance in the 2008 fall semester, will receive two complimentary tickets to a 2009 regular season home game and a Chick-fil-A coupon.

Students in Georgia's neighboring states also have the opportunity to earn free Braves tickets in exchange for their good grades and attendance. Students in grades K-12 who live in Greenville, S.C.; Birmingham, Ala.; and Chattanooga, Tenn., and those cities' surrounding communities are eligible to take part in the All-Star Student Achievers Program. For a full list of participating cities in these states and for further information on the program, go to braves.com/allstar. Every student participating in the program will be entered into a random drawing for the opportunity to be one of four students selected to attend a Braves batting practice and to participate in a pre-game presentation.

Additionally, the metro Atlanta school with the most participation in the program will receive a special visit from Chick-fil-A and a Braves player. All-Star Student Achiever ticket forms will be distributed by schools to qualifying students. Completed ticket forms, signed by the school principal, must be returned to the Braves ticket office at: P.O. Box 4064, Atlanta, Ga. 30302, by June 30.

FINANCIAL AID

For the 10th consecutive year, the Braves and Publix Super Markets are partnering to offer high school scholarships to graduating seniors throughout Georgia. Six $2,000 scholarships will be awarded to students who have demonstrated strong community involvement as well as solid academic performance throughout their high school careers.

Applications are available at braves.com/community and at public and private high schools throughout Georgia. Students with a cumulative grade point average of at least 3.0 should submit an application along with:

* One letter of recommendation.
* A letter of acceptance from a college or university for the fall 2009 semester.

* An essay describing how the applicant has made an impact in the community.

Completed applications must be postmarked by Mar. 31. Scholarship recipients will be honored during an on-field presentation prior to the Braves game on May 2 vs. the Houston Astros. Each winner will be presented with a check for $2,000 by a Braves player and a representative from Publix. All applicants will receive a Braves promotional item.

FIELDS OF DREAMS

Former Brave **Marquis Grissom** (CF, 1995-96), now the first base coach for the Washington Nationals, not only will be at Turner Field for the season-opener April 10 (7:30 p.m.), but he'll also be in the suburb of Conyers April 9 from 3-7 p.m. for a special opening of his own. Grissom will host the Grissom Fields of Dreams Spring Extravaganza to celebrate the recent acquisition of the facility, a private baseball and softball complex with two fields located at 1355 Sigman Rd., in Conyers. Grissom and "friends" will provide hands-on training and tips. There also will be other events, including a home run derby; skills assessment; batting practice; and an autograph session, as well as an appearance by the Atlanta Braves B.A.T. Team (Braves around Town) and a pre-Easter Egg Hunt for ages 3-7.

BALLS & STRIKES

- **Javy Lopez** (C, 1992-2003) is scheduled to throw out the ceremonial first pitch April 14 before the Class-A Rome Braves' first home game of the season at State Mutual Stadium. Game time is listed as 7 p.m. against the Savannah Sand Gnats.

- The Braves filed a breach of contract lawsuit against the Hartford Life Insurance Company asking $4.82 million for the time **Mike Hampton** was on the disabled list last season. The suit was filed in U.S. District Court in Atlanta.

- **Tom Glavine** was among the celebrities that came out to celebrate the grand re-opening of the newly-renovated Versace Boutique at Phipps Plaza Feb. 13. The VIP event, hosted by Versace and InStyle Magazine, was held at the Mason Murer Fine Arts Gallery in Atlanta.

BOBBY COX

MANAGER

THE FRONT OFFICE REALLY GAVE US WHAT WE NEEDED

ACQUIRING GARRETT ANDERSON in late February was the final piece of the puzzle in building our 25-man roster. We had a lot of young outfielders in camp that could use another year in the minors, and this helps in many ways.

I've seen Garrett play, and I can't say enough about him. I've always admired him and tried to catch games when he was playing just to watch his swing. I always liked guys who could make a good at-bat every single time up and get the run in, and Garrett is that type of guy.

He's a solid guy, can really drive in the runs. His batting average with runners on is phenomenal. He's a young guy yet, only 36 years old. He really fits on our team.

I've said it over and over again, our ambition for this winter was hoping to find two starters - we'd take one. And we ended up with three starters. I think the front office had a great winter and now a good spring, getting Anderson.

With all these pieces - the starters, Anderson, and the guys we have coming back - our goals have increased tremendously.

We feel we have a good, competitive team. And we were able to do this keeping our pitching intact. We were also able to get Tom Glavine back. You're so much better off having more depth entering the season.

We have an experienced rotation. I've always liked Javier Vazquez. He's always gotten a strikeout per inning, which a lot of guys can't say. I see him as a quality pitcher, durable, gives you a good game every time out and gives you a chance to win.

There's one young kid - Jair Jurrjens is just 23-years-old, but he pitched really well last year. I don't want to forget Jorge Campillo, either, and the job he did for us last year. Whether he starts or is in the bullpen, having him is a plus. We need long-innings guys in the bullpen, too.

> "WITH ALL THESE PIECES... OUR GOALS HAVE INCREASED TREMENDOUSLY."

I'm not sure Peter Moylan will open the season with us. The doctor's orders are 12 months instead of 11, so we may not see him until mid-April or closer to the end of April. I like the way Rafael Soriano looks. Mike Gonzalez should be outstanding. He's feeling better than 100 percent.

I like the way Jeff Francoeur worked this off-season. He's much more comfortable at the plate and he looks good - his approach to the ball, using all the fields. I have high expectations of Jeff, driving in 100 runs again.

Kenshin Kawakami fell right into the routines of our workouts, and he's fitting in well. I think he's picking up some English, but we're not picking up much Japanese! His interpreter, Daichi Takasue, is terrific, too. He speaks perfect English and is really making it easier for all of us.

One of the big changes during spring training was the influx of the Japanese media that follows Kawakami. I've visited Japan with the MLB All-Star team, and Japanese fans are very knowledgeable and they like to know about their guys. The Japanese media that were in camp and those who will be following Kawakami are just like the American media. They ask the same type of questions but the only difference is that there are more in their group, and they're only asking about one player!

Japan is a huge baseball country, and they're very interested in how their player is doing and how well he is adjusting to the American game.

Someone said to me, "I noticed you had Kawakami pitching with Lowe (in the bullpen). Why was that?" It really didn't mean anything. I just said, "He was a star in Japan, so he goes first."

The media is very respectful of all of the staff. They'll give a little bow before we start talking. But I won't expect the American media to do that!

PLAYING PEPPER

JAVIER VAZQUEZ

ALLISON SHIRREFFS

Vazquez struck out at least 150 every season since 2000, a nine-year stretch surpassed only by Pedro Martinez (11) and Roger Clemens (10) since 1990.

INTERVIEW BY
PATTY RASMUSSEN

CHOPTALK: Why do you eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich before you start? Do you like creamy or crunchy peanut butter?

JAVIER VAZQUEZ: (Laughs) I like creamy peanut butter. I like peanut butter and jelly, but it's really just something to have before I got to pitch.

CT: You grew up in Puerto Rico, which is home to so many great ballplayers. Why do you think it has produced so much baseball talent?

VAZQUEZ: It's really one of the favorite sports in my country. When I was growing up, I played basketball and baseball. My father got me a ball, glove and bat when I was three. A lot of kids don't just play ball - they follow it growing up. The weather has a lot to do with it. We can play it year round. There are some sports where you need a lot of equipment, and in baseball you don't. I remember playing with my brother. To get a better eye on the ball, we'd play with a broomstick and a little tape ball. That was just to have a better eye for hitting, though. It was always possible to find a few friends to get together and play.

CT: Your favorite player was Robbie Alomar (12-time All-Star second baseman from 1990-2001). What was it about him that made you admire him so much?

VAZQUEZ: He could do it all. I grew up watching him play. He was from Puerto Rico, and I was an infielder growing up, so he was a great role model and a great player.

CT: When did you meet him the first time, and what was your reaction?

VAZQUEZ: I tried to be cool, but it was amazing. When you meet guys that you never thought you'd meet, you get that "Wow!" feeling. It was that way for me when I met Robbie.

CT: What were you like as a kid? Quiet? Mischievous?

VAZQUEZ: (Laughs) I was an angel! We were pretty well behaved. My father was raised in the military. My grandfather, I never met him because he died before I was born, was in the military. He was a World War II veteran and spent a lot of time in North Carolina, Georgia and Germany. My dad grew up that way, so he was a strict father, but very loving. My parents live in Ponce, Puerto Rico now. My uncle was also in the military. He was a Vietnam War veteran. And my father served in the National Guard. He lived at Ft. Bragg, N.C. I told him when I was playing in the South Atlantic League, "Hey, we're playing the Tigers in Fayetteville (N.C.)," and he said, "I lived there!"

CT: Do you have brothers and sisters?

VAZQUEZ: I have one brother, Carlos, two and a half years younger than me. He played professional baseball, three years, for Tampa. He's doing well, and even though I was two and a half years older than him, we always played together.

CT: You're known as an "innings eater." During each of the past nine seasons, you pitched at least 198 innings and earned at least 10 wins. Why are you so durable?

VAZQUEZ: First off, I always say I'm blessed by God. I know I've been blessed, but I work hard in the off-season and during the season. I take a lot of pride in pitching, in taking the ball every five days and giving my team every opportunity to win.

CT: Being blessed with good genetics takes you only so far in baseball. How do you stay fit?

VAZQUEZ: I take a month off after the season, but during the rest of the off-season, I work out lifting and running, five days a week. I start tossing around the beginning of December. During the season, I do a similar workout, though not as hard. I do my lifting program two times between starts.

> "I TAKE A LOT OF PRIDE IN PITCHING, IN TAKING THE BALL EVERY FIVE DAYS AND GIVING MY TEAM EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO WIN."

CT: How did you meet your wife, Kamille? How long have you been married?

VAZQUEZ: I met my wife when I was 15 and she was 13 years old. I played with her brother in the 15-18-year-old league, and we went to different high schools. We've been married for 10 years this past November.

CT: Do you have children?

VAZQUEZ: We have three children - two daughters, Kamila (5) and Kariana (11 months), and a son, Javier (4).

CT: With three little ones, you must love the off-season?

VAZQUEZ: That's really it. I love to spend time with my family. We're always together. So much of our time during the season is spent away from each other. During the off-season, I'm taking the children to school and to their activities and spending time together.

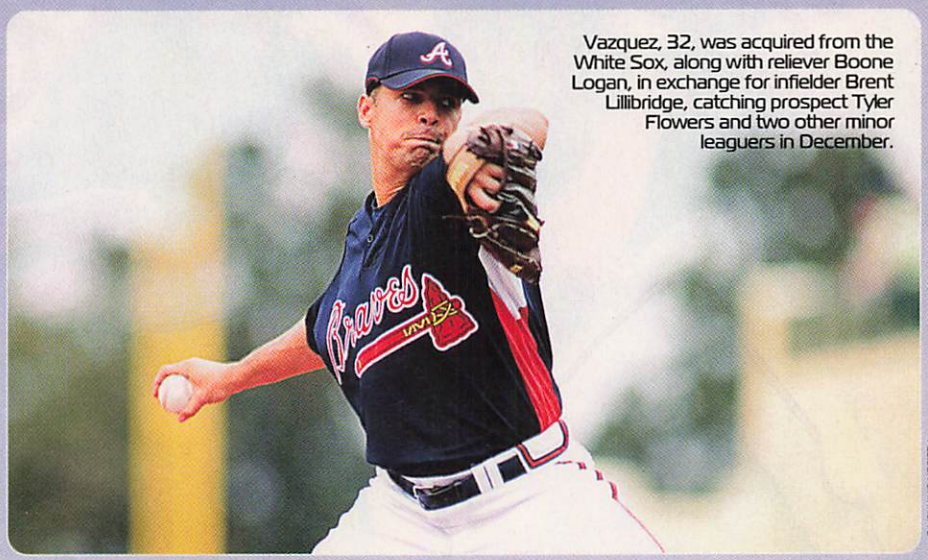
CT: Does little Javier already have a bat and ball?

VAZQUEZ: Oh yes! He loves it. He loves to play baseball! He'll be able to play coach pitch ball after the end of this season.

CT: What's your favorite ballpark to pitch in?

VAZQUEZ: I've got a few. I always loved pitching in Atlanta. It's a nice ballpark, and I've played against Atlanta a lot. It's a big ballpark, and I like big ballparks! Of the West coast stadiums, I like playing in San Francisco. I like that new ballpark and play well there. I didn't like Candlestick at all. It was always too cold.

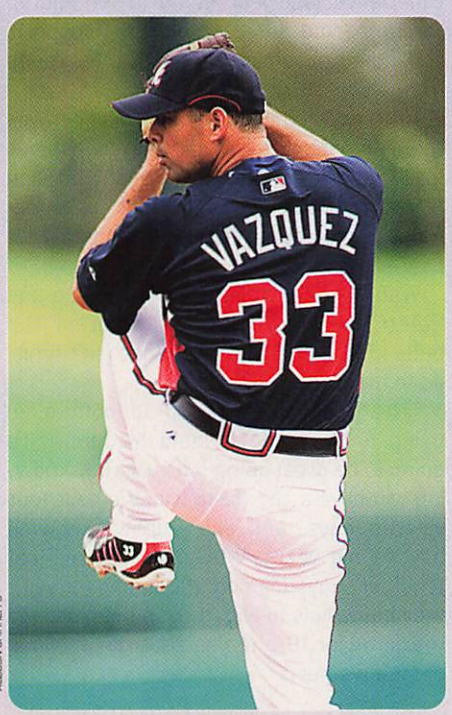
CT: What do you know now as a pitcher that you wish you knew when you were starting out?



Vazquez, 32, was acquired from the White Sox, along with reliever Boone Logan, in exchange for infielder Brent Lillibridge, catching prospect Tyler Flowers and two other minor leaguers in December.

ALLISON SHRREFFS

VAZQUEZ: Just the little things you learn. When you're young, you rely so much on power instead of knowing how to pitch. It's not just throwing hard, but learning the little things, understanding how important feel and location are. I came up to the big leagues when I was 21 years old, and if I had learned back then what I know now, I think I would have had better years early on.



ALLISON SHRREFFS

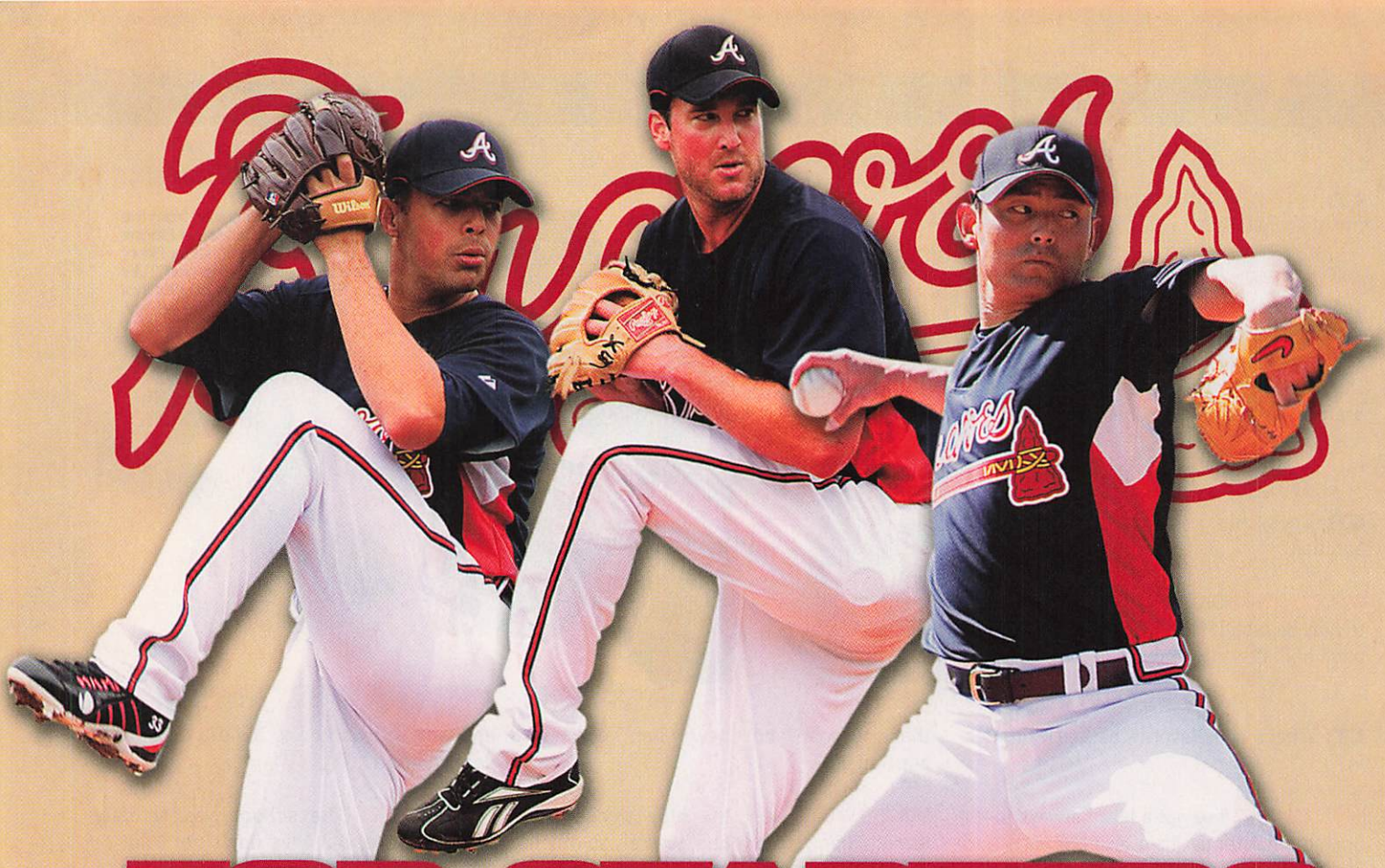
> **"I LIKE THE NL. I'VE ALWAYS SAID THAT. GROWING UP, I LOVED TO PLAY ON THE FIELD. I WAS AN INFIELDER, AND I'VE ALWAYS LIKED TO HIT."**

CT: You've played in both the American League and National League. Which is your preference? What's the best thing about being back in the NL?

VAZQUEZ: I like the NL. I've always said that. Growing up, I loved to play on the field. I was an infielder, and I've always liked to hit. For me, only pitching and sitting down is not the way I played baseball when I grew up. I love that in the NL you have to hit and bunt. I feel more like a complete player in the NL.

CT: Tell us about your foundation, the Javier Vazquez Foundation, "Ks for Kids," and why you wanted to build a school for deaf children?

VAZQUEZ: The school was actually already there, but they don't get a lot of funds from the government. They rely a lot on private funding. So, that's what I'm trying to do. We helped them build a computer room with all the equipment the deaf kids need to study and be prepared. Right now, we're raising money to build another building. My grandmother, who died a couple of years ago, was deaf. It was something my mother was always involved in, working with deaf children and adults, and we knew that school, because it was next to the school that I attended and now my children attend. It's in my community, close to us, and we wanted to help. This year we're also working with diabetes, because my daughter, Kamila, is a type 1 diabetic. We had an event to raise funds for a Pediatric Diabetes Center in Puerto Rico and a "K's for Kids" gala event last year in Chicago for Children's Memorial Hospital. I'm sure we'll get to know people and hospitals in Atlanta, too. These two things, helping deaf children and kids with diabetes, are close to me, and that's why we do it. It means something to me and my wife.



FOR STARTERS

Vazquez, Lowe And Kawakami Drive Hope Of Rotation Revival And Post-Season Return

PHOTOS BY ALLISON SHIRREFFS

BY GARY CARUSO

Making up 20 games and jumping over three teams in the standings (Phillies, Mets and Marlins) is never an easy achievement. But considering the glut of injuries the Braves endured last season and the sweeping overhaul of the starting rotation achieved by Frank Wren this off-season, such drastic improvement by the 2009 Braves doesn't feel out of reach at all.

President Obama's rallying motto for the nation of, "Yes, we can!" perfectly fits the Braves' goal for the season as the April 5 season opener at Philadelphia approaches (8 p.m., ESPN2).

"We can compete in the NL East easily," said Brian McCann. "It's on us to bring it every single night, and we can do that. Being consistent on a day-in, day-out basis is the key. I'm 100 percent confident about the team we have."

Then, Braves fans, it's time to believe, "Yes, they can!"

Wren's off-season plan was to rebuild the starting rotation that was decimated by injuries last year and to find a strong bat for the outfield. He accomplished both, acquiring three veteran starting pitchers to build a rotation potentially as good as any in the National League, and adding free agent leftfielder Garret Anderson to bolster the lineup significantly.

"We can compete with this team if our starters keep us in the game," said Chipper Jones. "With the power arms we have back in the bullpen, I think we'll win our share of games as long as the starters keep us in."

The rotation of Derek Lowe, Jair Jurrjens, Javier Vazquez, Kenshin Kawakami and Tom Glavine is well-suited to do just that, as well as to pitch deep into games, minimizing wear-and-tear on the relievers.

Additionally, there's plenty of depth in starters, should it be needed. Top prospect Tommy Hanson is a threat to make the team out of spring training, or shortly thereafter. Jo-Jo Reyes and Charlie Morton possess quality arms and gained valuable experience last year filling in for injured veterans. And don't forget Tim Hudson is scheduled to return in August after rehab from elbow surgery.

Pitching, pitching and more pitching was the dominant factor in carrying the Braves to an unprecedented 14 straight division titles from 1991-2005, and that same formula is in place to help end the three-year post-season drought.

With Mike Gonzalez, Rafael Soriano and Peter Moylan at the back end of the bullpen, the pitching excellence isn't limited to the rotation either.

"The pitching staff, top to bottom, is going to be exciting," said McCann. "It's going to be great going out every day knowing you have a chance to win. We have four veteran guys, and Jair Jurrjens is well beyond his years. When you put all that together, guys logging 200 innings a year, they know how to win, they've been around the game for 10-plus years... that's the kind of stuff we need.

"The organization went out and found some outstanding starters, and if we swing the bats like we're capable of, we're in good shape," McCann continued. "We've got the bats to score the runs. It's a matter of going out and doing it every night. Consistency comes with knowing your swing, knowing the pitcher who's throwing to you, and going up to the plate with a game plan every single time. If we have a team filled with guys who never take an at-bat off, we're going to see results. We definitely have the offense to do that."

The lineup, of course, is led by Chipper, the defending National League batting champ. McCann and a host of other talented young players who should be on the rise make the batting order a force from top to bottom. Garret Anderson gives the lineup an additional veteran presence with experience and a very impressive resume.

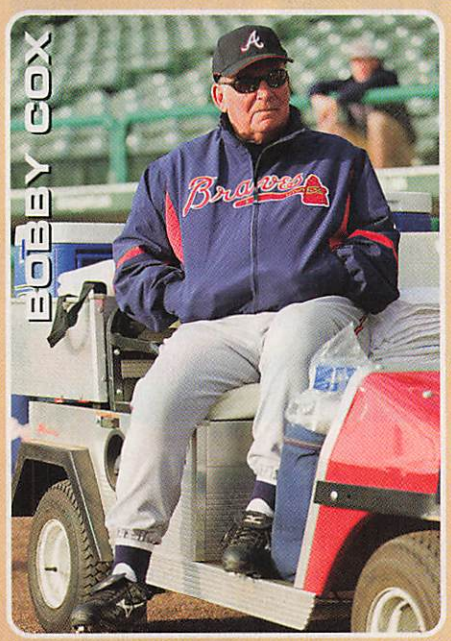
"I think we're going to be a lot different team that any Braves team in the past, but I'm excited," said Jeff Francoeur. "We have a lot to prove - myself personally and as a team. We want to show that last year was a fluke. A lot of bad things happened that no one could have predicted. We have a lot of heart on this team, and we're willing to lay it on the line to win. There's a lot of excitement and expectation."

The Braves were 72-90 last year, their worst record since 1990, and their fourth-place finish followed a pair of third-place finishes in 2006 and '07. There's much to prove.

"The National League East is a good division. It really makes your juices flow, because you're going to have so many big games, so many natural rivals among the division," said Lowe, who helped the Dodgers win the NL West last year. "Yes, you play those teams a lot, and there are other teams coming in - the Red Sox, the Yankees - but you want it tough. You want to play the best teams in baseball. We know what we have to do.

"There's no reason to talk about who's the best team in the division. That's a waste of time. You have to play good for six months, and the team that stays the healthiest is going to win."

Here's a position-by-position look at what Bobby Cox has to work with in his 23rd season as Braves manager (1978-81, 1990-present) and 27th overall in the majors. He ranks fourth on the all-time victory list with 2,327 wins, trailing only Hall of Famers Connie Mack and John McGraw, as well as Cardinals manager Tony La Russa.



STARTING PITCHING

How deep and talented is a rotation that has a 305-game winner penciled in as its fifth starter?

After a season spent searching for starting pitchers in the bullpen and in the farm system, the Braves want durability and reliability in their starting staff this year, like they had during most of their 14-year run of division titles when starters seldom missed an assignment. They seem to have found that by signing free agents Lowe and Kawakami, acquiring Vazquez by trade with the White Sox, and re-signing Tom Glavine.

The 35-year-old Lowe, designated their ace, has averaged 15 wins and 208 innings in his seven seasons as a starter, including last year with the Dodgers, when he was 14-11 with a 3.24 ERA, making 34 starts and working 211 innings.

Kawakami, 33, is the Braves' first Japanese player. He pitched 11 seasons with the Chunichi Dragons of the Japanese Central League. He was the league Rookie of the Year in 1998 and its MVP in 2004 when he was 17-7 with a 3.32 ERA and 176 strikeouts and just 38 walks in 192 1/3 innings. He also won the Japanese equivalent of the Cy Young Award that season, and he has three Gold Gloves on his resume. For his career, he is 112-72 with a 3.22 ERA and has averaged fewer than two walks per nine innings.

Vazquez, 32, has made at least 32 starts in each of the past nine seasons. Since 1990, only Greg Maddux (13, from 1996 through 2008) and Glavine (12, 1996-07) had longer runs of 32-start seasons. The owner of 127 career wins, Vazquez was 12-16 with a 4.67 ERA for the White Sox in 2008, following an exceptional 2007 when he was 15-8, 3.74.

Jurrjens, only 23, blossomed as a rookie last year, finishing 13-10 (.565), 3.68 with a team that played .444 ball. He led Atlanta in starts (21), innings (188 1/3) and strikeouts (139).

Glavine, who is recovering from elbow and shoulder surgery, became a free agent after last season but signed a one-year contract to try to build on his a 305-game career total that ranks 21st all-time, fourth among lefties.

Hanson could be too good to keep down on the farm, and Hudson could be the best second-half pickup in the league. Jorge Campillo and Buddy Carlyle are capable spot starters, and Morton, Reyes and James Parr offer even more strength in reserve.

RELIEF PITCHING

An outstanding bullpen is expected to back up the much-improved starting rotation. Gonzalez, a lefty, is back as the lead candidate for the closer's job, but he could get strong competition from Soriano, a righty who was supposed to be last year's closer until elbow pain forced him to miss most of the season and eventually undergo nerve transposition surgery Aug. 28.

Gonzalez, 30, was 0-3, 4.28 last year but successfully converted 14 of 16 save opportunities after returning June 18 from elbow surgery a year earlier. While working his

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

way back to full strength, he still struck out 44 in 33 2/3 innings, walking 14. He had a personal streak of 39 straight save conversions finally broken Sept. 9.

Soriano, a 29-year-old Dominican, was 3-for-4 in save opportunities last year but worked just 14 innings. The Braves hope he'll be back to his 2007 form when he was 9-for-12 in save opportunities, recording 70 strikeouts and walking only 15 in 72 innings.

The key setup man could be Australian sidearmer Moylan, 30, yet another Brave who is trying to recover from surgery. He had elbow ligament transplant surgery May 8. Recovery typically requires a year, but since Moylan only pitches an inning at a time, the Braves hope he'll be ready on or around Opening Night. He was 5-3 with a 1.80 ERA in 80 games (90 innings) in 2007 and had a 1.59 ERA in 5 2/3 innings last year before he had to shut down.

Others competing for jobs in the bullpen include righthanders Manny Acosta, Blaine Boyer, Stephen Marek, Carlyle, Campillo and Jeff Bennett, and lefties Boone Logan, Eric O'Flaherty and Jeff Ridgway.

CATCHER

There's not much that McCann hasn't accomplished in his first three and a half seasons in the majors, which is why, at age 25, he's considered one of the bright young stars in baseball. A National League All-Star and Silver Slugger winner last year, he's now 3-for-3 in All-Star selections and 2-for-3 in Silver Sluggers (voting by managers and coaches for the best hitter at each position) in his first three full seasons.

Last year, McCann batted .301, second among everyday Braves to Chipper, and led the team in home runs (23), doubles (42) and RBIs (87), even though he was fourth on the club in at-bats.

McCann's backup is newly acquired David Ross, who signed a two-year free agent contract after spending most of last season with Cincinnati before being released in August and signing with Boston (.225 overall with 3 home runs and 13 RBIs in just 142 at-bats).

FIRST BASE

The Braves felt they made the best of a difficult situation at last year's July 31 trading deadline when they off-loaded free-agent-to-be Mark Teixeira to the Angels in exchange for first baseman Casey Kotchman and reliever Marek. Unfortunately, Kotchman's bat never got untracked (.237 batting average/2 home runs/20 RBIs in 43 games), probably leaving some fans wondering about the team's future at this position.

Make no mistake, however, Kotchman, only 26 years old, has solid credentials that include being a first-round draft pick of the Angels in 2001. At the time Atlanta acquired him last year, he led the best team of record in the majors in hits (107), was tied for the club lead in RBIs (54), and was third in home runs (12) and batting average (.287).

The 6-3, 215-pound Kotchman, who bats and throws left-handed, also is a solid gloveman (.997 career fielding percentage). Though he's not regarded as a consistent home run threat (33 career home runs in 1,289 at-bats), he does have good gap power (career-high 37 doubles in 2007) and should hit for a good average. He batted .296 for the Angels in 2007 and had a lifetime average of .274 in the American League.

The Braves are confident he'll settle in nicely in his first full season in the National League. His backups are versatile Martin Prado, who played in 17 games at the position last season, mostly when Kotchman left the team to be with his ailing mother, and Greg Norton, the club's best pinch-hitter.

SECOND BASE

Kelly Johnson hopes he can pick up where he left off last year. If he can do that, or anything close to it, he'll realize the potential as a hitter that the Braves have long seen since drafting him in 2000 with a compensation pick (38th overall player selected).

Johnson, 27, put together a 22-game hitting streak, the longest of the year in the National League, from Sept. 1-24. During the binge, he batted .402 with 18 RBIs, 3 triples, 3 home runs and 10 multi-hit games. He finished his second full season in the majors with a .287 average, led the Braves in triples (6) and was second in doubles (39). He also was second on the club in steals (11).

Originally drafted as a shortstop, Johnson was converted into a leftfielder in 2005, and wasn't turned into a second baseman until 2007. Prado, who batted .320 in 78 games last year, also is the primary backup at this position.

THIRD BASE

This position belongs to Chipper, the reigning National League batting champion (.364), who is coming off one of the finest seasons of his career. One of the greatest switch-hitters in history and a likely candi-

date for the Hall of Fame, Jones turns 37 on April 24 yet only seems to be getting better with age.

He was voted the starting third baseman on the National League All-Star team last year, his sixth All-Star appearance, and kept his batting average at or above .400 most of the first half, not dropping under until June 19.

The only question about Jones, who also finished runnerup for the NL batting crown in 2007, is how many games he will play. An assortment of injuries has limited him to an average of 124 games over the last five years. Last season, he played in 128 games (just 115 starts), and was limited to pinch-hitting duty the last week and a half due to a sore right shoulder.

With 408 career home runs, Jones ranks 42nd all-time. He needs just 20 more to move into 39th place, which would leave him three homers behind Cal Ripken.

Omar Infante and Prado are the backups at third.

SHORTSTOP

One of the best young shortstops in baseball, Yunel Escobar was slowed by shoulder problems in the second half last year and practically sat out the final two weeks of the season when he had only 3 plate appearances. Nevertheless, the strong-armed, 26-year-old Cuban batted .288 for the season with 10 home runs and 60 RBIs. His biggest hit came June 2 at Turner Field, when he delivered a two-run, 10th-inning walkoff home run to beat the Marlins, 7-5.

The Braves think so highly of Escobar that they traded Edgar Renteria, a multiple Gold Glove and Silver Slugger winner, to open the position for him prior to last season. He has a rifle arm and is capable of playing steady, as well as spectacular, in the field. Once again, Prado is a backup at this position, as is Infante, a 27-year-old veteran who was signed to a two-year contract in the off-season after hitting .293 with 24 doubles in his first year with the Braves.

LEFT FIELD

Garret Anderson is 36 years old and isn't likely to produce the type of numbers he did from 2000-03 when he averaged 30 home runs and 120 RBIs over four seasons, but he's a career .296 hitter and a true professional who is a formidable addition to the lineup.

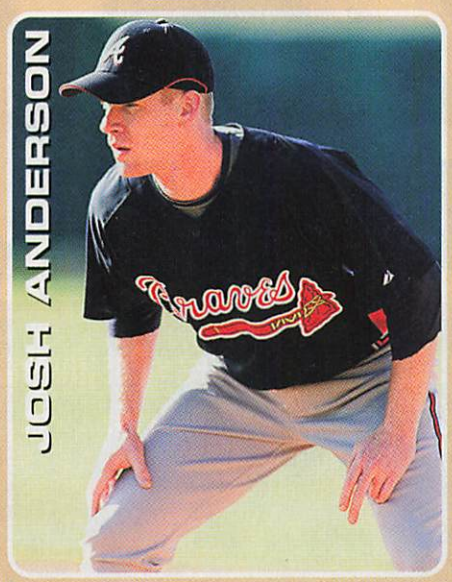
Just how Cox will utilize him remains to be seen, but he's equally effective against left-handed and right-handed pitching, potentially relegating Matt Diaz to a backup role and occasional starts to rest Anderson.

Diaz, 31, is coming off a lost year, due primarily to a knee injury that sidelined him from May 27 until the last game of the season. After hitting .327 in 2006 and .338 in 2007, though, he managed just .244 last year with 2 homers and 14 RBIs in 43 games. He also struck out 32 times and drew only three walks in 135 at-bats.

Gregor Blanco, Brandon Jones and Norton also figure into potential backup roles. Blanco, 25, benefited greatly from Diaz's absence last year to get the most playing time in left field. He made 55 starts there as a rookie, as well as 54 starts in center and 4 in right field. The speedy Venezuelan batted .251 with one home run, 38 RBIs and a team-high 13 stolen bases. He also led the team with 74 walks, but was third in strikeouts (99).

Jones, 25, has yet to establish himself in the majors, but did make 27 starts in left field last year when he hit .267 with one home run and 17 RBIs in his first extended exposure to the majors.

Norton, 36, is a switch-hitter who is most effective batting from the left side. He led the majors last year with 3 pinch-homers, 18 pinch-RBIs, and 17 pinch-walks.



CENTER FIELD

This position was up for grabs in spring training. The leading contenders appeared to be fleet-footed Josh Anderson and untested Jordan Schafer, who has yet to play above the Double-A level. Blanco also figured into the competition.

Mark Kotsay made the most starts (80) at the position last year but was traded to the Red Sox late in the season. Anderson, 26, has just 61 games of major league experience. He was acquired from Houston after the 2007 season and spent most of 2008 at Triple-A, where he hit .314 with 4 home runs, 40 RBIs and 42 stolen bases. He followed that with 40 games in Atlanta where he hit .294 with 3 homers, 12 RBIs and 10 steals. In six full seasons of pro ball, he's never stolen less than 41 bases in a season.

Schafer, a non-roster invitee, is one of the top prospects in the farm system. Only 22 years old, he's regarded as a top-notch fielder with excellent potential as a hitter. He started slow last season after serving a 50-game suspension, yet still hit .269 with 10 home runs and 51 RBIs and 12 steals at Mississippi.

RIGHT FIELD

Much of the Braves' hopes for improvement this year ride on the strong shoulders of Jeff Francoeur, who suffered through an extremely disappointing season in his third full year in the majors. He entered the season as a .280 career hitter who averaged 24 home runs and 104 RBIs in his first two seasons in the majors, only to end at .239 with 11 homers and 71 RBIs in '08.

The Braves need additional power this year, and they hope much of that will come from Francoeur, 25, who won a Gold Glove for his fielding and cannon arm in 2007. Blanco and Brandon Jones are his backups.

- Patty Rasmussen contributed reporting to this story.

Hanley Ramirez (L-R), Ryan Howard and Johan Santana promise to make the Braves' uphill climb in the NL East a tough road.

UP FOR GRABS!

Phillies, Cubs And Dodgers Look Like Favorites - But (Almost) Anything Is Possible

BY KEN ROSENTHAL

Ten different National League clubs have reached the World Series in the past 12 seasons. The Cubs or Dodgers could be the next new Series qualifier. Or maybe the Phillies will become the first pennant winner to repeat since the 1995-96 Braves.

The beauty of the NL is that no one has any idea what will happen.

For the most part, the league lacks big-money powerhouses. The top six spenders last season all were in the AL. The Dodgers and Cubs, who ranked 1-2 in the NL in payroll, spent just slightly more than the Mariners.

Once again, the Cubs will provide one of the more interesting storylines – they failed to mark the 100-year anniversary of their last World Series title with another championship last season, so now the pressure is off, right?

The Dodgers, who spent all winter and part of spring training negotiating with Manny Ramirez before finally signing him, will be another team to watch in manager Joe Torre's second season.

The Mets continue to lead the league in nervous breakdowns, and the Marlins could be this year's Rays, making a surprising breakthrough.

Or maybe something completely wacky will happen, and a team such as the Pirates, Padres or Nationals will contend.

Okay, let's not get carried away!

The point is, the NL is fabulously competitive and gloriously unpredictable – in short, a lot of fun.

Here is a look at how the league could break down, along with capsules of the Braves' inter-league opponents and their predicted finish in the AL East.

NL EAST

1. PHILLIES (1ST, 92-70)

MANAGER: Charlie Manuel (5th year)
KEY ADDITIONS: Raul Ibanez, LF.
KEY LOSSES: Pat Burrell, LF.
BIG STICK: Ryan Howard, 1B (.251, 48 homers, 146 RBIs). Howard reported to spring training 20 pounds lighter, determined to improve his defense and reverse his two-year decline in the offensive percentage categories.
ACE: Cole Hamels, LHP (14-10, 3.09 ERA last season). Now that Hamels finally has proven he can stay healthy, the only question is how much he is affected by a jump in innings from 183 1/3 in 2007 to 262 1/3 in '08, including post-season.
BOXSCORE: Virtually the entire roster returns, but this is the rare championship team that does not figure to become complacent. New general manager Ruben Amaro Jr. probably overspent by awarding Ibanez a three-year, $31.5 million free-agent contract, and the Phillies will be without left-handed reliever J.C. Romero for the first 50 games due to a drug-related suspension. Not to worry, Jimmy Rollins, Chase Utley & Co. play with an edge that continues to elude the Mets.
LINESCORE: Righthander Brett Myers, a free agent at the end of the season, looks poised for a big year after dropping 30 pounds.

2. METS (2ND, 89-73)

MANAGER: Jerry Manuel (1st full year)
KEY ADDITIONS: Francisco Rodriguez, RH closer; J.J. Putz, RH setup man.
KEY LOSSES: None.
BIG STICK: David Wright, 3B (.302, 33 homers, 124 RBIs). Wright received criticism for batting only .243 with runners in scoring position, but he still had the third highest on-base/slugging percentage among major-league third basemen and impressive numbers in September.
ACE: Johan Santana, LHP (16-7, 2.53). In his first season with the Mets, Santana was his usual brilliant self after the All-Star break, going 8-0 with a 2.17 ERA in 15 starts.
BOXSCORE: The Mets fixed the back of their bullpen, but what about their offense? True, they tied with the Phillies for second in the NL in runs scored last season, but many fans clamored for the team to sign free agent Manny Ramirez. Instead, the Mets are going with youngster Daniel Murphy in left, and Manuel started spring training by announcing plans to experiment with Luis Castillo in the leadoff spot and Jose Reyes in the No. 3 hole. Stay turned.
LINESCORE: First baseman Carlos Delgado, who turns 37 in June, is the linchpin of the offense. He was awful in the first half last season, terrific in the second half.

3. BRAVES (4TH, 72-90)

MANAGER: Bobby Cox (24th year)
KEY ADDITIONS: Derek Lowe, RHP; Kenshin Kawakami, RHP; Javier Vazquez, RHP; Garret Anderson, LF.
KEY LOSSES: John Smoltz, RHP.
BIG STICK: Chipper Jones, 3B (.364, 22 homers, 75 RBIs). As always, the question with Jones is whether he can stay healthy. He turns 37 in April, and the Braves would be thrilled if he plays in 131 games, his average the past two seasons.
ACE: Derek Lowe, RHP (14-11, 3.24 ERA last season). Committing $60 million to a 35-year-old pitcher is dangerous, but Lowe was every bit as good as Santana and CC Sabathia down the stretch last season, producing a 0.94 ERA in his last nine starts.
BOXSCORE: The overhaul of the rotation was nothing short of breathtaking, and the emergence of righthander Tommy Hanson would make the group that much stronger. The bullpen depth also should be impressive if Mike Gonzalez, Rafael Soriano and Peter Moylan all stay healthy. Anderson, changing leagues for the first time at age 36, is another "if," and center field is an open question. The Braves definitely will be better than they were last season, but a post-season berth might be too much to ask.
LINESCORE: Paging Jeff Francoeur, paging Jeff Francoeur. The performance of the Braves' offense could hinge on whether he recaptures his 2006 form.

4. MARLINS (3RD, 84-77)

MANAGER: Fredi Gonzalez (3rd year)
KEY ADDITIONS: Scott Proctor, RHP; Emilio Bonifacio, IF.
KEY LOSSES: Mike Jacobs, 1B; Scott Olsen, LHP; Josh Willingham, LF; Kevin Gregg, RHP.
BIG STICK: Hanley Ramirez (.301, 33 homers, 67 RBIs). By dropping him to the No. 3 spot, the Marlins plan to make better use of Ramirez's power. He showed improved plate discipline last season, increasing his on-base percentage to .400.
ACE: Ricky Nolasco, RHP (15-8, 3.52 last season). To fully grasp Nolasco's dominance, consider that from June 15 on, he struck out more than a batter per inning while holding his walks to one per nine innings, according to Baseball Prospectus. That's pitching.
BOXSCORE: By the end of last season, many scouts believed that the Marlins had the best rotation in the division. It should be even better this season. Righties Josh Johnson and Anibal Sanchez are healthy, and lefty Andrew Miller could fulfill his promise after overhauling his delivery. The Marlins have adequate replacements – or better – for each player they lost. It's not a stretch to envision them as contenders.
LINESCORE: This could be the season in which the Marlins start to reap big returns from their blockbuster trade with the Tigers in December 2007. Miller appears poised for a breakthrough, and Cameron Maybin is ready to take over in center field.

5. NATIONALS (5TH, 59-102)

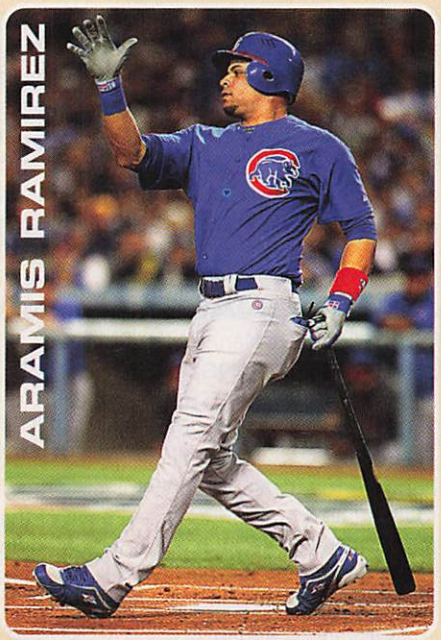
MANAGER: Manny Acta (3rd year)
KEY ADDITIONS: Adam Dunn, OF; Josh Willingham, LF; Scott Olsen, LHP.
KEY LOSSES: Tim Redding, RHP.
BIG STICK: Dunn, LF or 1B (.236, 40 homers, 100 RBIs). The only major leaguer to hit 40 or more home runs in each of the past five seasons, Dunn will bring life to an offense that was the third worst in the NL last season.
ACE: John Lannan, LHP (9-15, 3.91 ERA last season). Lannan isn't a classic ace, but he's the best the Nationals have. Olsen, who is usually good for 30 starts and 180 innings, has allowed 82 homers the past three seasons.
BOXSCORE: The addition of Dunn makes the offense more interesting, but let's not kid ourselves – the Nats are still a bad team, deficient in every aspect of the game. The resignation of general manager Jim Bowden on Mar. 1 is the first step toward the franchise showing increased stability, but even under a new GM, the Nats will be a year or two away from making a significant jump – and that's assuming they make a series of shrewd decisions.
LINESCORE: The highlight of the season for the Nationals will be when they select San Diego State righthander Steven Strasburg with the first pick of the 2009 draft. The Nats also own the 10th overall pick.

NL CENTRAL

1. CUBS (1ST, 97-64)

MANAGER: Lou Piniella (3rd year)

Interesting makeover. The Cubs, trying to balance their right-handed-leaning lineup, dumped one of their better players, Mark DeRosa, signed free agent Milton Bradley, and created a second-base platoon of Mike Fontenot and Aaron Miles. If the oft-injured Bradley fails to stay healthy, the plan could prove a bust. Still, the rotation is deep, with four candidates for the fifth spot, and Carlos Marmol should prove an effective replacement for departed closer Kerry Wood.



JEFF GROSS/GETTY IMAGES

2. BREWERS (2ND, 90-72)

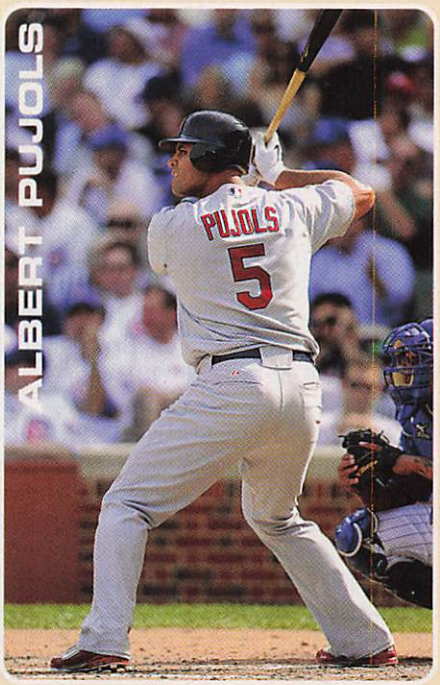
MANAGER: Ken Macha (1st year)

Best of the rest, even after losing CC Sabathia and Ben Sheets. The Brewers will need to take a step forward offensively after finishing 11th in the NL last season in runs scored. The pitching will be a work in progress. Braden Looper joins a rotation that will benefit from the return of Yovani Gallardo, who made only four starts last season due to a knee injury. Trevor Hoffman is the new closer, but the Brewers also must replace lefty Brian Shouse and righty Guillermo Mota in their bullpen.

3. CARDINALS (4TH, 86-76)

MANAGER: Tony La Russa (14th year)

La Russa excels at maximizing his available talent – a good thing, considering that the Cardinals failed to sign a closer and made shortstop Khalil Greene their only major off-season acquisition. Perhaps the only way for the Cardinals to contend is if righthander Chris Carpenter rebounds from shoulder and elbow trouble. The team will try two youngsters, Chris Perez and Jason Motte, in the closer's role. The successful conversion of outfielder Skip Schumaker to second base would be a boost.



RON VESELY/GETTY IMAGES

4. ASTROS (3RD, 86-75)

MANAGER: Cecil Cooper (2nd year)

Don't be fooled by their 39-19 finish in 2008. The Astros could not afford to retain one of their best pitchers, lefthander Randy Wolf, and one of their better hitters, third baseman Ty Wigginton. The oft-injured Mike Hampton will replace Wolf, and the Astros will try a platoon of Geoff Blum and Aaron Boone at third. The catching is suspect, and centerfielder Michael Bourn still hasn't proven that he can hit.

5. REDS (5TH, 74-88)

MANAGER: Dusty Baker (2nd year)

Yuck. The new centerfielder, Willy Taveras, had a .308 on-base percentage last season. The new catcher, Ramon Hernandez, was a player that the Orioles could not wait to trade. Perhaps both will benefit from joining new teams, but that's more wishful thinking than objective analysis. The only way the Reds will improve is if their veteran starting pitchers – Aaron Harang and Bronson Arroyo – are better than they were last season.

6. PIRATES (6TH, 67-95)

MANAGER: John Russell (2nd year)

The only thing the Pirates will "accomplish" this year is their 17th straight losing season, breaking the major-league record held by the 1933 to '48 Phillies. The team went 17-37 after trading Jason Bay, Xavier Nady and Damaso Marte last season, and its only significant additions, Eric Hinske and Ramon Vazquez, are complementary players. Look for another round of trades in July – second baseman Freddy Sanchez, shortstop Jack Wilson, maybe first baseman Adam La Roche – as the Pirates try to continue adding to their young core.

NL WEST

1. DODGERS (1ST, 84-78)

MANAGER: Joe Torre (2nd year)

Last season offered tangible evidence of Manny Ramirez's impact. The Dodgers averaged 4.17 runs per game through July 31, the day they acquired Ramirez, and 4.63 runs per game after that, reaching the National League Championship Series. The pitching will be awfully young following the departures of two starters, Derek Lowe and Brad Penny, and reliever Takashi Saito. The additions of Randy Wolf and Guillermo Mota will help, but the Dodgers will rely heavily upon Chad Billingsley, Clayton Kershaw and Jonathon Broxton.

JED JACOBSOHN/GETTY IMAGES

2. DIAMONDBACKS (2ND, 82-80)

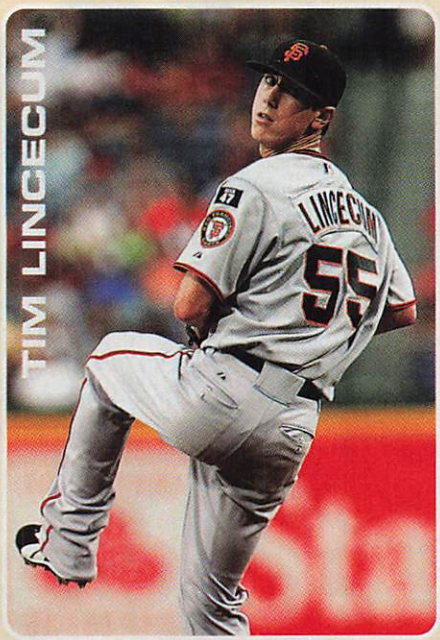
MANAGER: Bob Melvin (5th year)

Free-agent defections forced the D-Backs to regroup. The team lost a starter, Randy Johnson; two relievers, Brandon Lyon and Juan Cruz; and its second baseman, Orlando Hudson. Jon Garland will replace Johnson, and Felipe Lopez will replace Hudson, but what the Diamondbacks need most is continued progression from their younger position players. Their rotation, led by Brandon Webb and Dan Haren, should again be one of the league's best.

3. GIANTS (4TH, 72-90)

MANAGER: Bruce Bochy (3rd year)

Edgar Renteria? Really? The two-year, $18 million contract that the Giants awarded the free-agent shortstop was perhaps the biggest mistake of the off-season. Still, the Giants figure that a revived Renteria, Randy Johnson and free-agent relievers Jeremy Affeldt and Bob Howry could vault the team into contention in a mediocre division. They could have made a better case if they also signed Ramirez.



MIKE ZARRILLI/GETTY IMAGES

4. ROCKIES (3RD, 74-88)

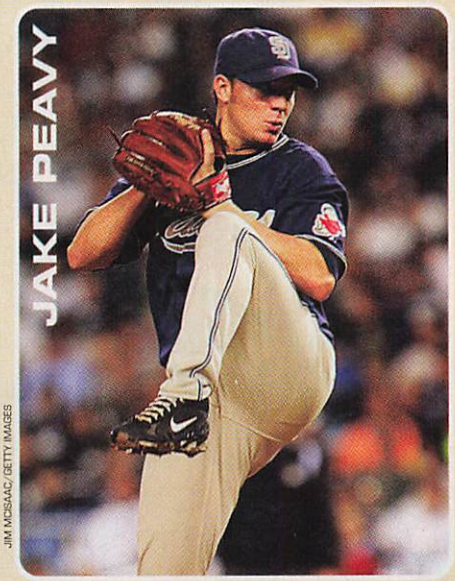
MANAGER: Clint Hurdle (8th year)

Replacing leftfielder Matt Holliday (traded), closer Brian Fuentes (departed free agent) and lefthander Jeff Francis (injured) will not be easy. Manny Corpas will replace Fuentes, but the Rockies must sort through a number of candidates in center and left field and bank on the newly acquired Jason Marquis and Greg Smith to fortify their rotation. A strong recovery by Todd Helton from back surgery would help.

5. PADRES (5TH, 63-99)

MANAGER: Bud Black (3rd year)

Hoo boy... The Padres will make news twice this season – when they trade righthander Jake Peavy and when they trade rightfielder Brian Giles. The organization needs to rebuild, and the new ownership figures to push the team in that direction. Second baseman David Eckstein and shortstop Luis Rodriguez will be the new doubleplay combination, while Heath Bell will replace Trevor Hoffman as the closer. The rotation is painfully thin behind Peavy and Chris Young.



JIM MCISAAC/GETTY IMAGES

INTER-LEAGUE OPPONENTS
AL EAST

2. YANKEES (3RD, 89-73)

MANAGER: Joe Girardi (2nd year)

Will Girardi still be the manager when the Yankees visit Atlanta in late June? Not if the Yankees underachieve after spending a combined $435.5 million on four free agents – lefthander CC Sabathia, righty A.J. Burnett, first baseman Mark Teixeira and left-handed reliever Damaso Marte. The recoveries of catcher Jorge Posada and closer Mariano Rivera from off-season surgeries are critical. And, of course, A-Rod will be a soap opera unto himself and also must recover from hip surgery that will cause him to miss the first month of the season or more.

3. RED SOX (2ND, 95-67)

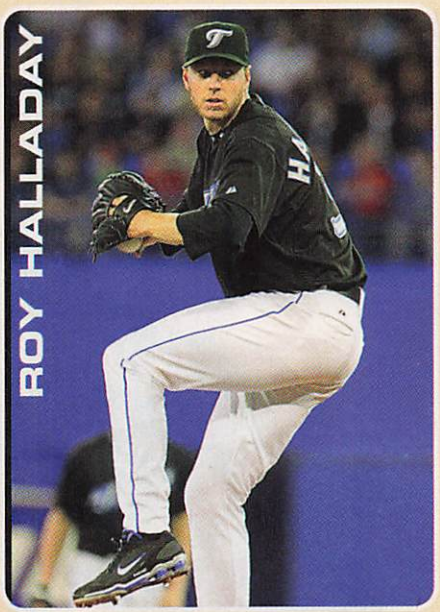
MANAGER: Terry Francona (6th year)

The Red Sox easily could win 100 games if they hit on some of their pitching gambles – Takashi Saito, Brad Penny and yes, John Smoltz. The offense, though, is a significant concern. Third baseman Mike Lowell is coming off hip surgery, rightfielder J.D. Drew struggles to stay healthy, and designated hitter David Ortiz could be in decline. The Sox also could be below-average offensively at two other positions – shortstop and catcher.

4. BLUE JAYS (4TH, 86-76)

MANAGER: Cito Gaston (1st full year of 2nd tenure)

The Braves need to hope that they miss righthander Roy Halladay, who is arguably the best pitcher in the game, when they host Toronto May 22-24. The rest of the Jays' rotation is young and unproven, and the team also is going with two young position players, Travis Snider and Adam Lind, in the left field/DH positions. The lineup underperformed last season, but the return of second baseman Aaron Hill will help both offensively and defensively.



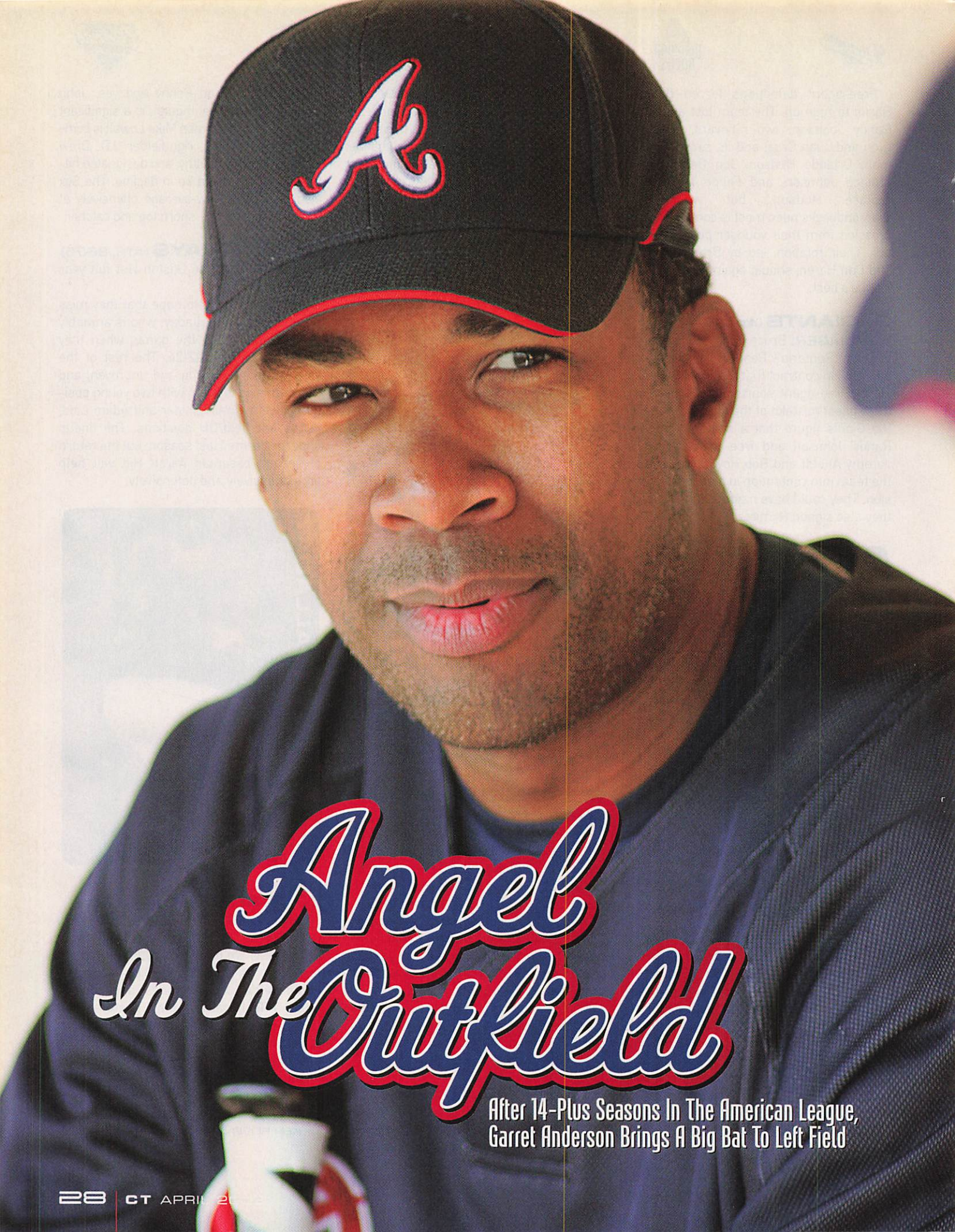
DAVE SANDFORD/GETTY IMAGES

5. ORIOLES (5TH, 68-93)

MANAGER: Dave Trembley (3rd year)

A team on the rise, but not this season. The Orioles are brimming with young players such as rightfielder Nick Markakis, centerfielder Adam Jones and former Georgia Tech catcher Matt Wieters, who likely will arrive at mid-season. The team's top pitching prospects, however, are probably a year away, and Jeremy Guthrie and Japanese free agent Koji Uehara are the only veterans of note in the rotation.

- KEN ROSENTHAL IS A SENIOR WRITER FOR FOXSPORTS.COM



Angel In The Outfield

After 14-Plus Seasons In The American League, Garret Anderson Brings A Big Bat To Left Field

BY RAY GLIER

If there was something more riveting about Garret Anderson on the field, maybe there would not be this discussion of his place in the game. His numbers are extraordinary, but Anderson does not launch majestic home runs, he does not protest calls, thump his chest, or scream, "Look at me."

Casey Kotchman calls Anderson, "one of the most under-appreciated" players in the game because Anderson simply refuses to be his own billboard.

"Who else has been more under the radar than this guy," said Kotchman, who played with Anderson on the Angels from 2004 until Kotchman was traded to the Braves last July 31. "How many guys do you not hear about that have over 2,300 hits?"

It is that demeanor, that lack of swagger, that makes Anderson perhaps a bit under-valued. But it also makes him a fit for the Braves. This is a clubhouse that still bans loud music and has few strict rules, such as being on time, instead leaving it to the players to set the example among themselves.

It's almost as if Anderson, 36, should have been a Brave all along, instead of spending the first 15 years of his career with the Angels.

He is in the mold of personalities such as Greg Maddux, Tom Glavine and Bobby Cox, among others, and looks up with a smile when it is suggested he landed in a proper place after the Angels did not pick up the option on the final year of his contract.

"It all happened for a reason," Anderson said. "You are usually where you're at because that is where you are supposed to be. I believe it's a good fit. There were other opportunities out there, but this was the right spot.

"I know I have a very stoic look on the field. I don't get very excited. It's who I am. It's my makeup."

The left-handed hitting outfielder brings a .296 career average to Atlanta, which includes a .290 average against lefties.

Anderson has 2,368 career hits and 272 home runs. He has played 14 full seasons and part of a 15th in the big leagues and, even after turning 36 years old last June, played 145 games for the Angels and batted .293.

The Braves are delighted with Anderson, who has been referred to as their "consolation prize." It was only after Ken Griffey Jr., decided to play for Seattle, instead of Atlanta, that the Braves kept shopping down the veteran outfielder aisle and found Anderson still available.

It is revealing about Anderson's personality that he does not attack the Angels for a lack of trust in his skills. He never chased free agency with the Angels, but the club let him get away, and the Braves got a bargain, some feel, for $2.5 million for one year.

Anderson only shrugs when asked about the Angels' reluctance to sign him. He said this was a different year for free agents and there was a surplus of corner outfielders, so he is not offended.

"It's hard to say I was disappointed," Anderson said. "I don't know if I am disappointed or not. I don't have any bitterness toward them, any ill will. In a perfect world, fantasyland, you would love for it to happen that way, to finish your entire career with one team, but it didn't happen. I just look back, and I'm thankful for the 14 I had there."

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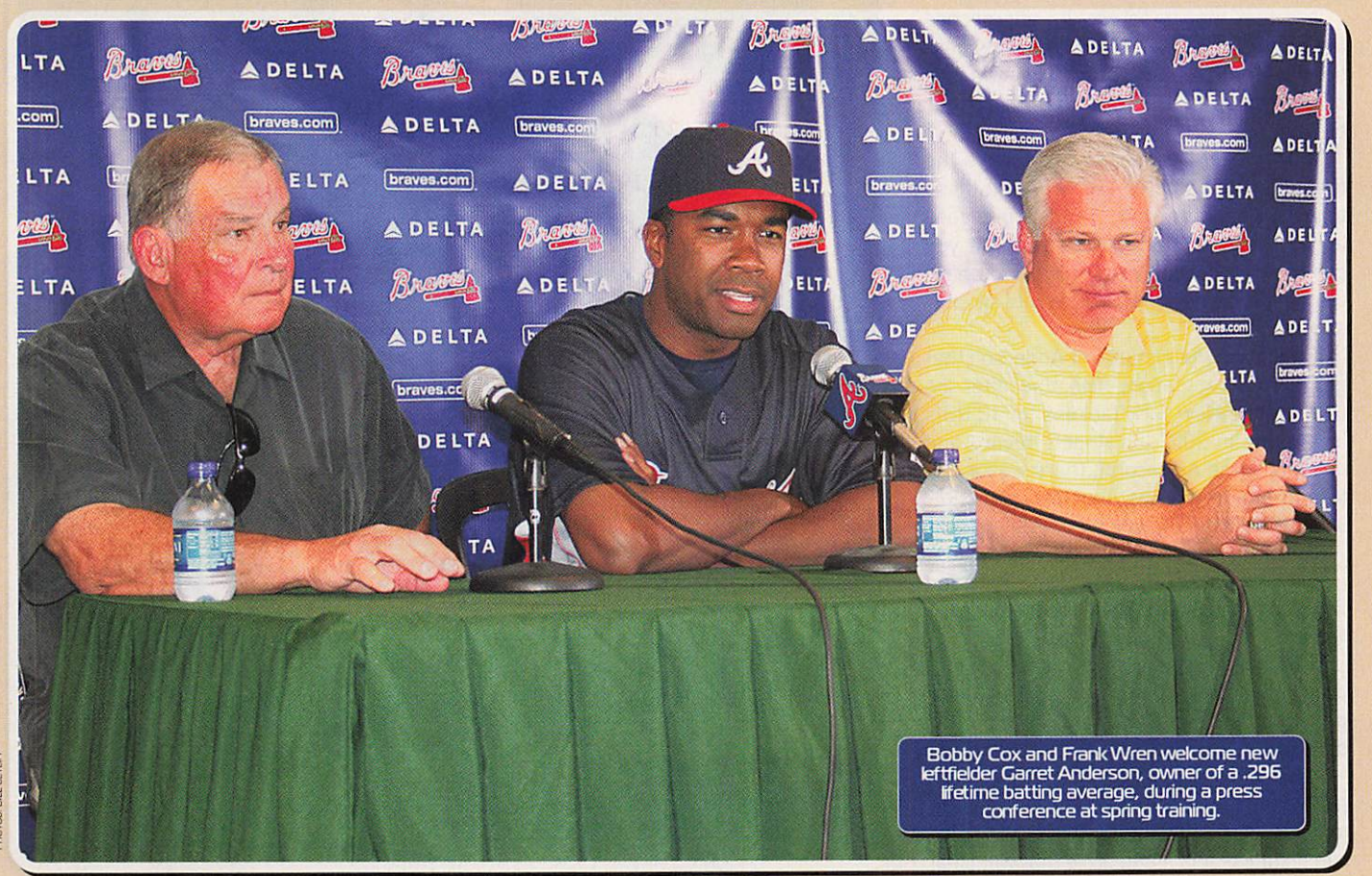


Bobby Cox and Frank Wren welcome new leftfielder Garret Anderson, owner of a .296 lifetime batting average, during a press conference at spring training.

PHOTOS: BILL SETLIFF

Anderson wants to play full-time and avoid a platoon situation in left field when the Braves face a left-handed pitcher, which happens frequently in the National League East. The numbers say he could be the everyday leftfielder and bat in the middle of the lineup, no matter what angle the pitch comes from.

Anderson has hit over .300 seven times in his career and struck out more than 100 times in a season just once.

"The guy knows how to hit, and he can hit against lefties," Chipper Jones said. "A lefty with his experience that can hit lefties is going to help us win games. I don't like guys who settle for platoon. Garret has never been a platoon guy. Why should he change the mentality now?"

Anderson's mentality seems almost Maddux-like, because the former Braves pitcher and four-time Cy Young Award winner coveted the mechanics of each pitch. Anderson's approach is the same way - one pitch at a time, one game at a time.

"I'm the guy who likes the journey. I like to do well along that process, that journey, just like the next player. But you can't play June games in April," he said. "You've got to play the game that day. You'll never hear me talk about what series is coming up."

It is that monotone way he approaches the game that caused some critics to question Anderson's effort. But mostly it's a lack of expression that caused the misperceptions.

"I have heard people say, 'He lacks the fire... he doesn't care.' I've heard all those things," Anderson said. "But if a guy goes out and plays as many games as I have, you can't say he doesn't care. If he didn't have the desire to play well, why would he play so much?"

It might be the pictures of Anderson that get him a reputation. The day after he crushed the New York Yankees for 10 RBIs in a game in 2007 (an Angels record and one shy of the AL record), there was a picture of him in the Los Angeles Times, following the last RBI, looking glum.

Anderson smiles. He's seen the picture. He says he was not going to celebrate and carry on in the dugout due to respect for the Yankees.

"I do have respect for the other team. I pray I don't do anything to offend the other person on the team," he said. "All I want to do is play hard."

Anderson's swing is as circumspect as his personality. It is fluid, in rhythm, not violent. He hits to all fields, and if he has home run distance, it is a line drive that will clear the fence, but not draw gasps for its majestic flight.

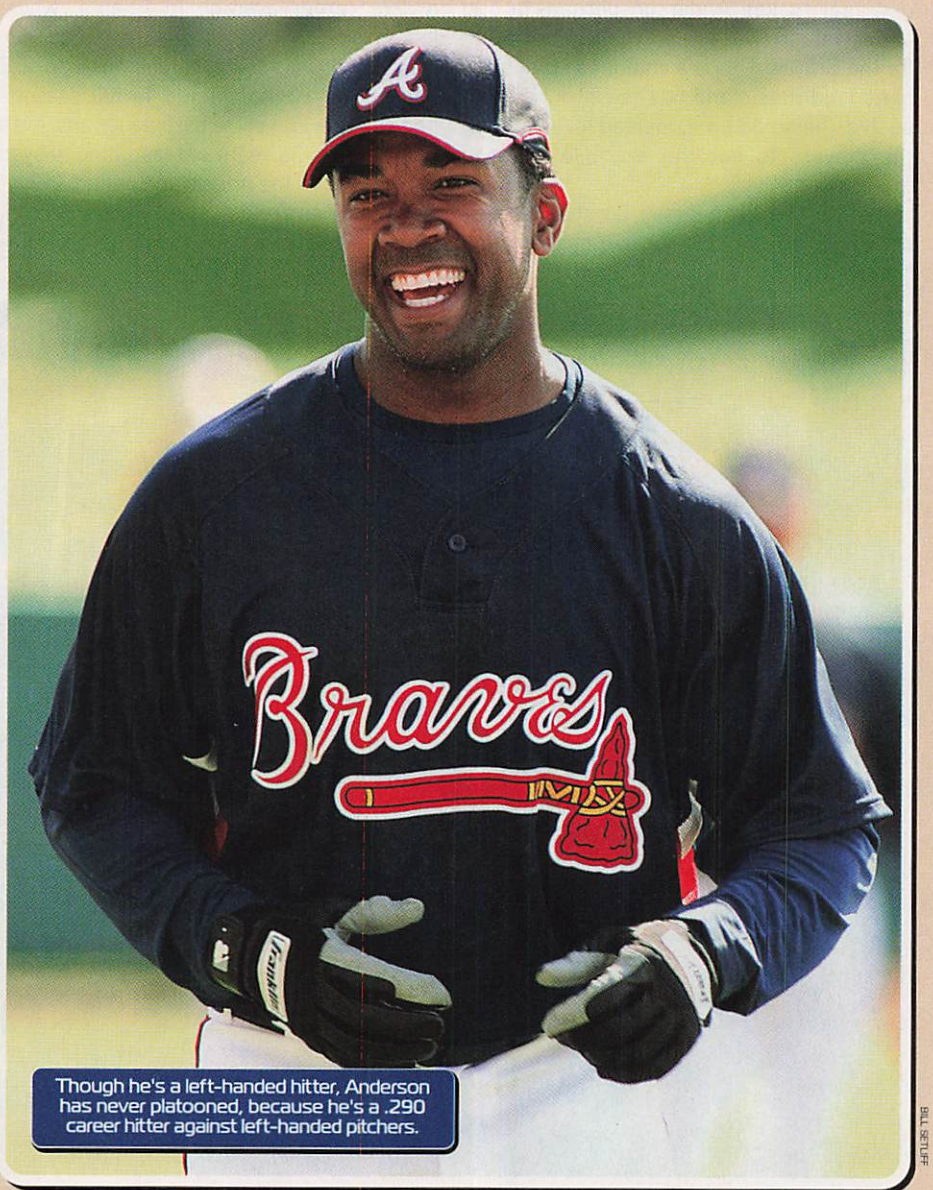
"I am a line drive hitter with occasional power," he said. "I'm not you're 35-plus home run guy. My swing doesn't suit that. It's line drives in the gaps. That's where I have made my money over the years, figuratively, not literally. That's my bread and butter, just in the gaps, line drives, hitting the ball everywhere."

More of a problem for Anderson than fitting into the Braves clubhouse or adjusting to the National League game is being away from his wife and three school-aged children. Even after night games with the Angels, he would wake up the next morning to take the kids to school. He's from Irvine, Calif., so he was right at home in Southern California.

"It's different, and it will start to hit them when the season starts," Anderson said. "That is the toughest part out of it. I just look at it where I had it good for a long time. I'm not complaining or anything like that."

There is one other matter that might be a topic for consideration about Anderson toward the end of the season. Where does he fit in the Hall of Fame discussion? His numbers are on the cusp of Cooperstown candidacy, and the Angels' organization does not have a player in the Hall. Could he be the first?

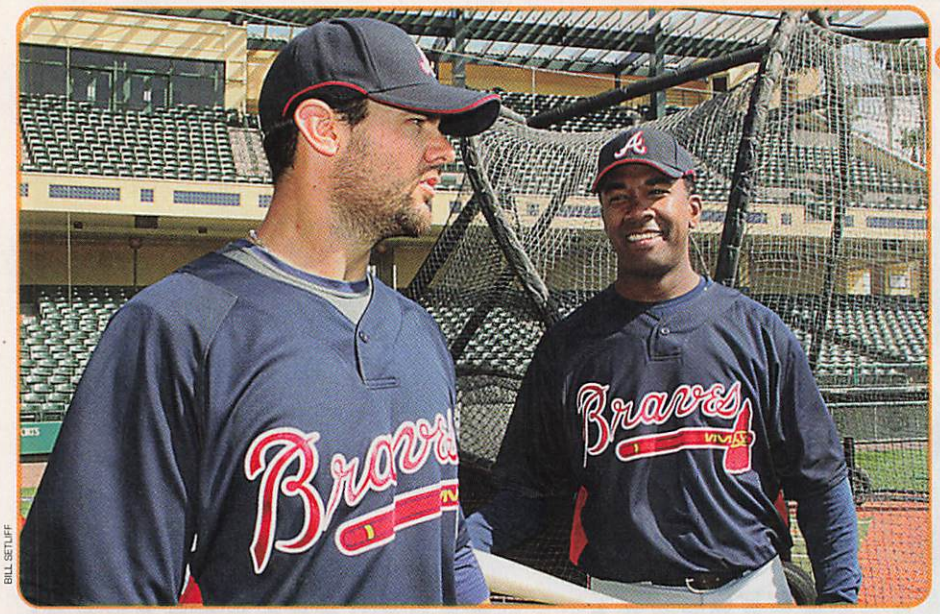
"I've heard the whispers," he said. "People have brought it up to me. It's not going to happen because I am sacrificing something. I'm not going to sell my soul for it. I try not to talk about it too much, because it is too far down the line."



Though he's a left-handed hitter, Anderson has never platooned, because he's a .290 career hitter against left-handed pitchers.

BILL SETLIFF

A FREE-SWINGING DOUBLES MACHINE



BILL SETLIFF

Former Angels teammates Casey Kotchman (L) and Garret Anderson, reunited this spring, add proficient bats to the Atlanta lineup.

BY STEVE FALL

BACK IN 1995, Garret Anderson and Chipper Jones each finished second in their league's Rookie of the Year balloting. While very different hitters, both have hammered pitchers ever since.

Anderson ranks second among all major leaguers since 1995 with 489 doubles. That trailed only Jeff Kent (491). He also placed third in hits (2,363) and eighth in runs batted in (1,291). Chipper enters this season ninth in doubles (448) and fifth in both hits (2,275) and RBIs (1,374) during that same time frame.

Anderson has put together 12 consecutive seasons of 75 or more RBIs, reaching that level each year since 1997. Only Manny Ramirez (14), Alex Rodriguez (13) and Carlos Delgado (13) have longer active runs. Just two players in baseball history have streaks longer than 15 years: Eddie Murray (20) and Hank Aaron (19).

From 2000 to 2003, Anderson drove home 115 runs each year. Only two active players have had longer 115-RBI streaks than Anderson's four: Albert Pujols (6) and Ken Griffey Jr. (5).

Although his production has slipped since early this decade, Anderson drove in 69 of the 258 baserunners aboard when he batted last season. That gave him the 13th-highest percentage of runners driven in (18.7) among major league players that qualified for the batting title. Kelly Johnson had the Braves' best percentage (15.6) in 2008.

On the negative side, Anderson rarely reaches base by drawing walks. He enters 2009 with 14 straight seasons of fewer than 40 walks in at least 400 plate appearances. That ties Willie Davis (1960-79) for the longest streak in major league history. Nobody comes close among active players: Ivan Rodriguez (1992-99) and A.J. Pierzynski (2001-08) both have had eight successive seasons of less than 40 walks.

Even free-swinging Jeff Francoeur drew 37 and 34 unintentional walks in 2007 and 2008, respectively. Anderson has never drawn as many as 30 unintentional walks in a season.

When Anderson hit 35 homers in 2000, he drew just 24 walks. That made him the fifth player ever to hit 35 home runs while walking less than 25 times. He joined Dante Bichette (1995), Alfonso Soriano (2002), Ivan Rodriguez (1999) and Walker Cooper (1947), who later played for both the Boston and Milwaukee Braves.

Anderson still gives the Braves a potent bat in the outfield, which they lacked last season.

Even though Casey Kotchman struggled after joining the Braves last season, he was one of just two major league players (along with Bengie Molina) to drive in 70 runs while striking out less than 40 times in 2008.

Kotchman has only struck out 51.7 times per 600 plate appearances in his career. Among all active players with at least 1,000 career plate appearances, that ranks as the 11th-best figure. The leaders include hitters with far less extra-base power than Kotchman, such as Juan Pierre and David Eckstein.

A stellar defensive first baseman, Kotchman committed just two errors last season – none after joining the Braves at the July 31 trade deadline. He became only the fifth first baseman since 1970 to make two or fewer errors in a minimum of 1,200 total chances. Steve Garvey (1984), Jim Spencer (1976), Todd Helton (2001, 2007) and Sean Casey (2005) matched this achievement.

Kotchman also fares well in advanced fielding metrics. According to Baseball Info Solution's plus/minus system, he ranked sixth among all major league first basemen. Kotchman recorded a plus-13 figure, which means he made 13 more plays than the average first baseman. That trailed only Mark Teixeira (+24), Pujols (+20), Joey Votto (+19), Lance Berkman (+18) and Carlos Pena (+14).

Should catcher David Ross return to his form of 2006, the Braves will have an extremely valuable bench player. That year his 15 doubles, one triple and 21 home runs made him the 13th major leaguer to have at least 35 extra-base hits in a season with fewer than 300 plate appearances. That list includes Francoeur in his standout rookie season of 2005.

Ross also drove home 52 runs in 2006. Only three other players have reached 20 homers and 50 RBIs in seasons with less than 300 plate appearances: Johnny Blanchard (1961), Willie McCovey (1962) and Glenallen Hill (1999).

Although he posted just a .203 batting average in 2007, Ross still hit 17 home runs in 348 plate appearances. That made him the eighth player ever to hit 15 home runs in fewer than 350 plate appearances in successive seasons.

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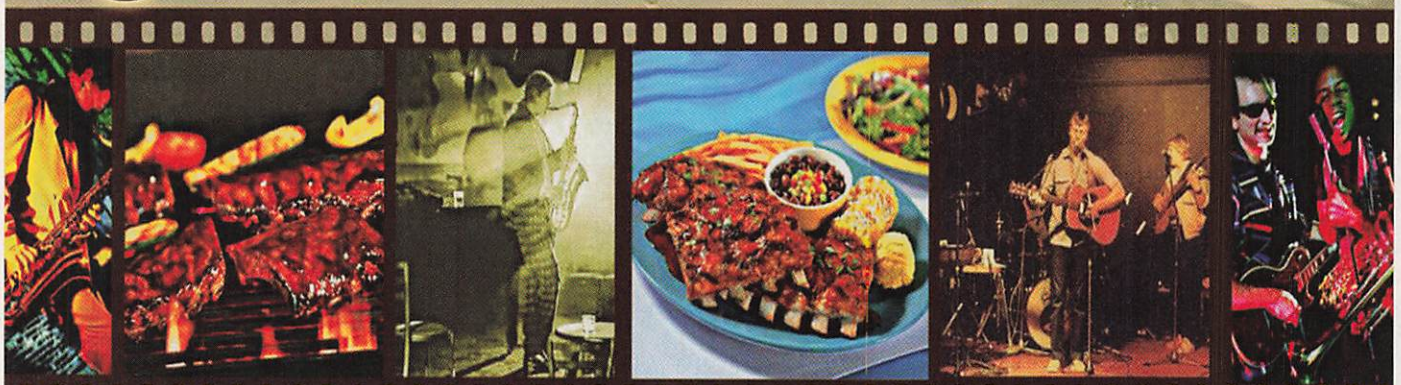

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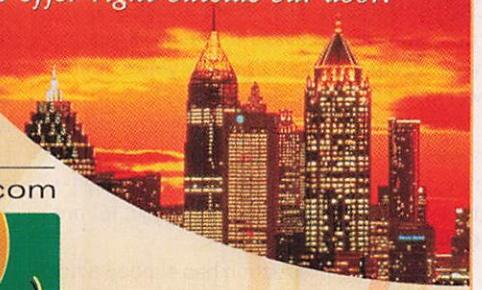

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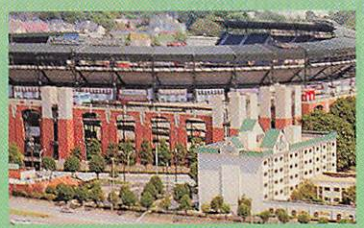

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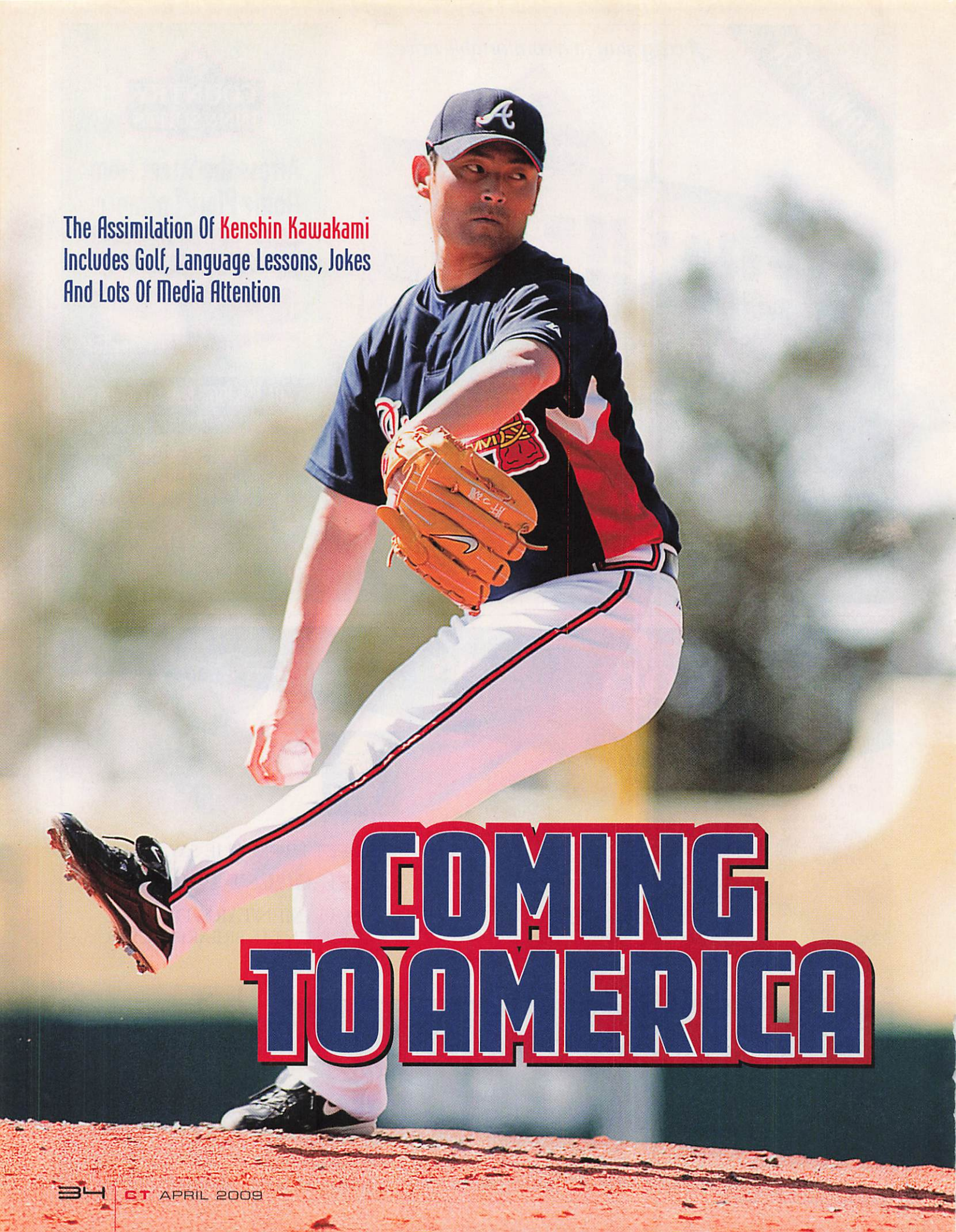


The Assimilation Of Kenshin Kawakami Includes Golf, Language Lessons, Jokes And Lots Of Media Attention

COMING TO AMERICA

BY RAY GLIER

On his way through the Braves clubhouse one morning during spring training, long-time clubhouse attendant, Fred Stone, gave a big wave and a loud, "Howdy" toward Japanese pitcher Kenshin Kawakami.

Kawakami stood there for a moment, then smiled wide, and returned his own, "Howdy."

"Now you're talking," Stone said in a big voice.

A few moments later, a Braves minor league coach came through the clubhouse and gave a Japanese greeting that sounded like "O-hi-o." Kawakami came right back with an "O-hi-o."

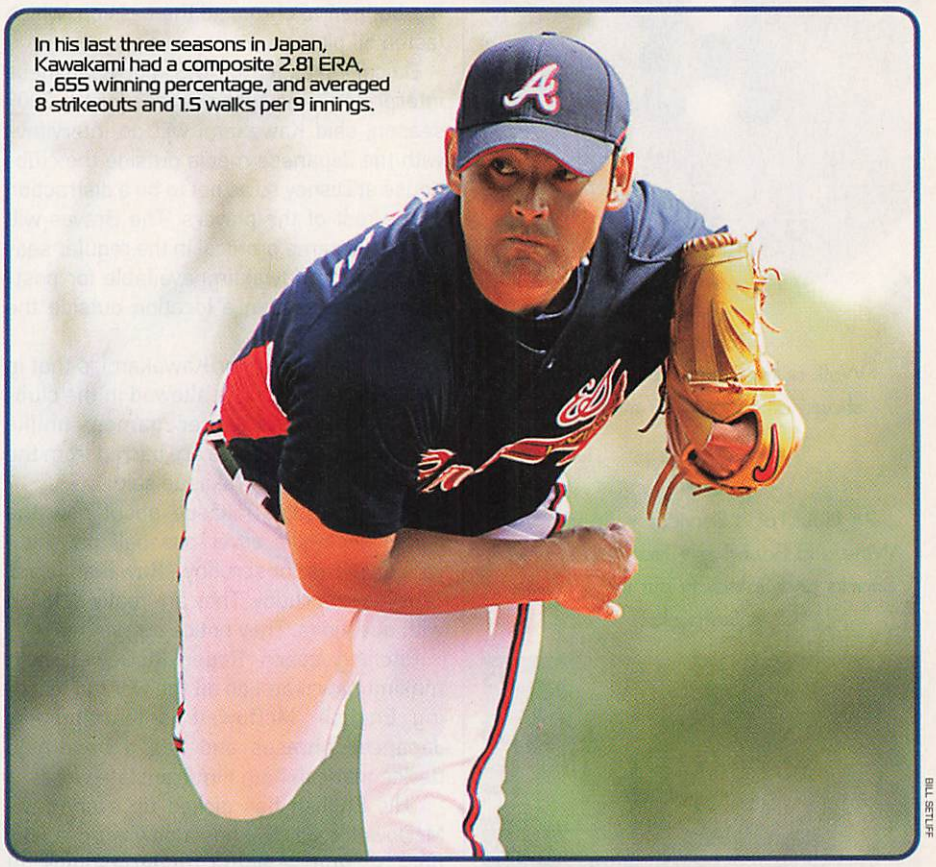
"Ohai-yo" actually is a shortened Japanese greeting for "good morning."

The assimilation of the 33-year old Kawakami into the culture and climate of the organization happens phrase by phrase, not just day by day, or week by week. It is a two-way street with the club and player easing themselves through a language barrier - his teammates learning bits and pieces of Japanese, and Kawakami learning English, as well as Spanish.

The right-handed pitcher, an ace in Japan for 11 years, has already mastered the perfectly southern phrase of "Y'all," and he's fit right in with a favorite tradition of Braves' pitchers: Golf.

"He can play," said Peter Moylan, the personable relief pitcher, who has invited Kawakami on golf outings. "He's very good."

PHOTOS: ALLISON SHIRRELFS



In his last three seasons in Japan, Kawakami had a composite 2.81 ERA, a .655 winning percentage, and averaged 8 strikeouts and 1.5 walks per 9 innings.

BILL SETLIFF

While many other major league teams have employed Japanese players, Kawakami is the first for the Braves. Thus, spring training this season is more than just getting arms in shape. It's also getting tongues untied and loosened up for the season!

What has struck some of the Braves is that Kawakami is making the path easier because of his disposition. There was a perception that Japanese players, like Ichiro Suzuki of the Mariners, were standoffish and did not easily integrate with the team.

Kawakami, on the other hand, stands to greet people, smiles wide, and says, "Hello."

"This guy is very approachable," Moylan said. "He is already one of us in the clubhouse. He has some jokes, and his interpreter translates them. Plus, he says his own little one-liners.

"He's already in with us. He's funny. He is not a guy who has come in, and you feel like you have to stay away from him."

Kawakami was a star in the Japanese league for the Chunichi Dragons, a hero along the lines of Tom Glavine. At one time, he was the highest paid pitcher in the league, which explains the horde of Japanese media following him in the U.S.

In his first spring training appearance at Bradenton, Fla., there were 30 Japanese media on hand, including sound technicians and cameramen for television.

Between his starts, three Japanese newspapers followed his path around Disney. Even a veteran wire service reporter from Japan, who typically follows Ichiro, was with Kawakami because Ichiro was with the Japanese national team that was back in Japan for the World Baseball Classic.

Kazumi Gillespie, a reporter who has been covering baseball in the U.S. for five years, files daily stories for the newspaper Chunichi Sports, and she said the stories are put on the front page of the paper, not in the sports section.

"You feel pressure, sure," she said. "He was an ace for 11 years. People know him every well."

In his first bullpen session after his first start in spring training, cameras were waiting for Kawakami on the field when he popped out of the clubhouse to walk out into right field to loosen his arm. The cameramen and reporters then scrambled to

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

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the landing space in the stands overlooking the bullpen to chronicle the session, which lasted 50 pitches.

Daichi Takasue, the U.S.-born Japanese interpreter hired by the Braves for the 2009 season, said Kawakami will do interviews with the Japanese media outside the clubhouse at Disney so as not to be a distraction to the rest of the players. The Braves will follow the same protocol in the regular season, making Kawakami available for postgame interviews in a location outside the clubhouse.

What is different for Kawakami is that in the U.S., reporters are allowed in the clubhouse before and after games, unlike Japan, where reporters are barred from the players' sanctuary, Takasue said.

Asked through Takasue about how the Japanese media cover baseball players - with reverence or scrutiny - Kawakami said, "They love scrutiny. They are really detailed with questions. They notice everything."

Pitching coach Roger McDowell isn't making Kawakami do all the work of learning English. McDowell is learning key Japanese phrases and has a hand-held device that can help him translate words.

"His English has picked up every day," McDowell said. "He has a new word, a new phrase, and a better understanding of things I say. We're on the same path. He's learning some English, and I'm learning some Japanese.

"His is a different personality than some of the Japanese I've been around. He's a little more outgoing. But it's just like us. The Japanese have some players who are reserved and some that are outgoing like Peter Moylan."

Aside from getting his vast repertoire of pitches smoothed out for the season, the most important part of bringing along Kawakami will be how to deal with testy game situations. In a tight spot, McDowell will have 30 seconds on the mound to get his point across. There will be no interpreter and no time to pull out his handheld translation device.

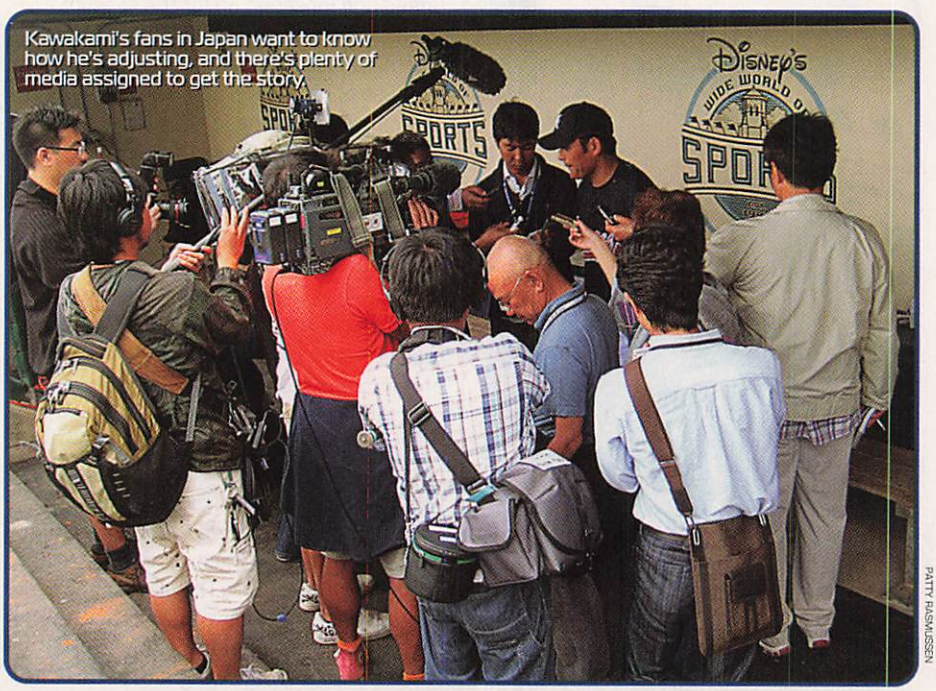
"Baseball being what it is, with players coming from all parts of the world, the situations don't change for us, and they come up in Japan just as they do in the United States," McDowell said. "We will probably have more of the in-depth conversations about what we want to do in situations prior to the start of the season. We'll have hypothetical situations and say, 'Do this, or do that' when this happens."

McDowell said Kawakami already understands "inside, outside" as to location of pitches. The next challenge is to communicate with the game on the line.

"You've got (Jimmy) Rollins on third, (Shane) Victorino on second, and two outs and you're facing Ryan Howard with first base open. What do you do?" McDowell said, throwing out a hypothetical situation.

That will be an easy one! No interpretation needed. No culture barrier to leap.

Bobby Cox or McDowell will just hold up four fingers.



Kawakami's fans in Japan want to know how he's adjusting, and there's plenty of media assigned to get the story.

PATTY RASMUSSEN

THE INTERPRETER

ALLISON SHIRREFFS

When Al Ferrer, a professor at the University of California-Santa Barbara, called Daichi Takasue to tell him if the Braves were going to hire him as an interpreter, Ferrer said, "I have some bad news."

"Immediately, I was devastated," Takasue said. "It was my dream job."

Quickly, Ferrer said he was just kidding. Takasue, 21, had the job as interpreter for the Braves' new pitcher, Kenshin Kawakami.

"The whole interview process, with the Braves and Frank Wren and with his (Kenshin's) agent, took three or fourth months, and I could not concentrate on my schoolwork," said Takasue, a student at UC-Santa Barbara. "This is really my dream job. I have been following baseball for eight years and watch it all the time and play in a fantasy baseball league."

Takasue, who was born in Walnut, Calif., and is a U.S. citizen, said he was in awe of Kawakami because he knew the pitcher's status as a star in Japan. He was also in awe of Braves players he was used to seeing on TV or reading about in newspapers.

"I'm in the same clubhouse with Chipper Jones," he said. "It's makes you very nervous when you meet him."

Takasue is with Kawakami constantly, but he knows that once the season starts, there is one place he cannot follow the pitcher. That's on the mound.

"In those very tight situations, he is thinking he is going to have to study a little bit of English for those situations and know how to communicate with the pitching coach out there," Takasue. "In situational strategy, he needs to know if he should walk this batter or face him."

The other issue is mechanics and how McDowell will communicate when Kawakami's release point, for instance, is not correct.

"We will work on that," Takasue said, "but he told me he has been playing so long he should know when that happens."

- RAY GLIER

MY ARM AND THE TEAM HAVE ME VERY EXCITED

I WAS OKAY WITH WHAT I DID at the end of last season, but I'm not going to say that I was very pleased with it. I started seeing my velocity go up, and that was a good thing. I feel really good now. In fact, I was pulling up on the reins at the start of spring training.

I finally feel like I'm getting a good understanding of my body, of my arm. At the beginning of spring training, I felt like my body was saying, "I feel really, really good," but my mind was saying, "Kick back a little bit. There's no need to go out throwing 100 percent when you've got five more weeks before you face the Phillies."

I feel like I'm 21, 22 years old, arm-wise. I'm on pace to be exactly where I need to be at the start of the season.

The main difference I'm feeling now in comparison to the end of last season is that I knew it was healed, but I still had the achy feeling. Now when I toss, I don't feel anything. There's no tightness or soreness whatsoever. I feel like I have a fresh new arm.

Mentally, I make myself hold back. I get fired up seeing the young players and how much energy they have, and it makes me want to push it. But then I remember seeing John Smoltz and how he would go about his business, not doing the minimum but not doing the maximum either. He was protecting the arm for when it really matters.

That's a very different mindset for me, a huge difference. I'm a max effort guy. Day in, day out, that's how I go at you. This year I feel a little different about it.

> "I FEEL LIKE I'M 21, 22 YEARS OLD, ARM-WISE. I'M ON PACE TO BE EXACTLY WHERE I NEED TO BE..."

I said earlier this year that I don't feel Braves fans have seen the way I can really pitch, but I meant that I don't think they've seen me at my best. I wasn't hurt when I got here, but it wasn't the right "feel," and now I have it. Toward the end of the year, the velocity wasn't completely back. Now I'm looking forward to a fresh arm.

The mental toughness I've been able to develop goes back to my father and the way he goes about his business. He's always looking for the next best thing in what he does. He doesn't see obstacles and only sees them as an opportunity.

I wanted to have that type of attitude, because it's made him successful. I saw the determination he had and the passion about what he does, and took it into my life and applied it to baseball.

There are times when I just sit back and look at a team we're going to play and match it up against our team. I'll match up their first baseman and our first baseman and all though the lineup, and I honestly believe we can contend with any team.

The winning atmosphere is here now. It comes from the pickups that we got. It comes from Matt Diaz coming in ready to go. His energy is getting on everyone. Chipper Jones looks great right off the bat, hitting line drives off of people's heads!

Brian McCann comes in 20 pounds lighter, and you can tell these guys want it. They want to get it done. They're tired of losing. And that's my main thing - I hate to lose.

So when these guys come in here like this, it's exciting. McCann says to me, "Gonz, are you ready to get it done?" That's all I need. I already had enough, but that puts even more fire to it.

When I saw those pickups, those three pitchers - Lowe, Kawakami and Vazquez - in addition to Jair Jurrjens, I knew that we'd be fresh in September. That's the key. Our bullpen was done by the All-Star break last year.

No, it's not the Daytona 500, it's reliever Jeff Ridgway cruising down the supermarket aisle during spring training with his children (L-R) Emily, Carson and Cade.

PHOTO: SPECIAL

FLORIDA HIATUS

Players And Their Families Get Creative In Dealing With Challenges Of Spring Training Living

BY PATTY RASMUSSEN

Jaena Norton, wife of Greg Norton, has this piece of advice for young baseball wives, "Don't get a dog unless your husband is signed to a multi-year contract!"

Though Jaena was kidding, as the owner of a 90-pound Weimaraner named "Blue," she knows dog ownership adds another layer of difficulty in finding a place to live during spring training in Orlando, Florida.

"We started looking for a place to live in early January," she said. "We need at least three bedrooms, because of our kids (son Jace, 3, and daughter Ciana, 2), but the deal breaker is the dog. We have to find a place that will take him, too!"

The Nortons, of course, managed to find a place where Blue was welcome, but it's the little things, or the 90-pound things, that fans don't see that make spring training challenging. For the Nortons, who make their off-season home in Colorado, that meant packing their vehicle to the gills with everything they would need - not just for spring training, but for the six-month baseball season. After shipping their car to Orlando, the Nortons packed seven more suitcases, two car seats, a double-wide stroller and a dog carrier and headed for the airport for the glamorous flight to spring training!

"I wish a reality show camera had been following us through the airport," Jaena said with a laugh. "It was crazy!"

An extraordinary amount of planning, logistics and expense go into uprooting a family for the two-month period of spring training. Some families who are fortunate enough to have the financial stability of a multi-year contract can buy a home in Orlando, if they choose. Others have to rent for two months. Housing and furnishings are usually located by word of mouth or by scouring the internet, and most families start looking in December. Vehicles can be rented, driven, or shipped to Orlando, but the trickiest decisions involve how to handle children and school. For these families, flexibility and creativity become the order of the day.

In 2006, Tim Hudson and his wife, Kim, bought a townhouse in Celebration, Fla., a planned community less than five miles from the Braves' training facility at Disney's Wide World of Sports. At the time, none of their three children, Kennedie (7), Tess (5), and Kade (4), were in school. So, when spring training rolled around, Kim packed clothes and toys from their home in Peachtree City, Ga., and moved the family to their spring training home. But what used

to be a relatively simple, temporary move became complicated in 2007 when Kennedie started school.

That year, with the school's blessing, Kim taught Kennedie herself during spring training. In 2008, Kim worked out an arrangement for Kennedie to go to school during the week as a student in her sister-in-law's class at an elementary school in Ft. Myers, Fla. Kim picked up Kennedie from Ft. Myers on Friday and took her back on Sunday night. But the trip is about two hours each way and became too inconvenient.

This spring, for the first time, Kim and the children stayed in Atlanta, making one 10-day trip, which overlapped with the kids' winter break, Feb. 16-20.

"This was a big issue for us," said Kim. "But it's so disruptive for Kennedie to miss school. We were lucky it worked out as long as it did."

According to Bill Acree, the Braves' director of team travel, coaches and players have a number of options regarding spring training living arrangements.

"We send them packets of information along with their invitations to spring training," said Acree. "In the packet are different housing options that they can do themselves, different rental car options."

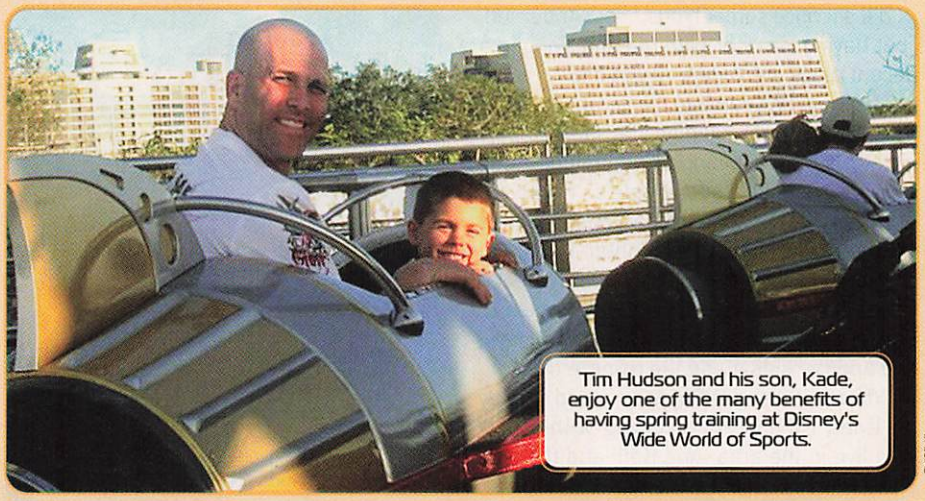
Players can also live in the team hotel, the Marriott World Resort close to the training complex or, for minor leaguers, the Marriott hotels at Lake Buena Vista Village.

"They can choose between having a roommate and not having a roommate," said Acree. "If you choose not to have a roommate, you pay for half the room."

Acree estimates 90 percent of players and coaches live on their own, and most bring their own vehicles. It's a change he noticed about 20 years ago.

PATTY RASMUSSEN

Clint Sammons' wife, Meredith, with their 90-pound Great Dane, "Jack," who made it difficult for them to find spring training accommodations.



SPECIAL

Tim Hudson and his son, Kade, enjoy one of the many benefits of having spring training at Disney's Wide World of Sports.

"It all boils back down to the basic agreement (between Major League Baseball and the MLB Players Association)," he said. "Before that, baseball had the National Football League mentality where you had to stay in the team hotel. At the end of spring training, teams used to barnstorm for a week or 10 days, and it wasn't conducive to having your family there - because you weren't there. Not to mention, your family would be living in the hotel for close to two months."

Because players are required to fly back to Atlanta as a team, Acree also arranges for the players' cars to be driven by off-duty deputies from the Orange County Sheriff's Department, back to Atlanta in a caravan, followed by empty vans.

"It's a one-day operation," said Acree. "The players bring their cars the morning we leave. The deputies drive them to Atlanta and have them in the players' lot (at Turner Field) by the time we get back."

After the cars arrive at Turner Field, the deputies pile into the empty vans for the ride back to Florida.

Most of the costs associated with living in Orlando for spring training are borne by the player. For single guys living in a hotel, it's a nice arrangement. Between the money they earn and the weekly envelope of meal money, their expenses are covered. The amount of meal money received is based on a number of variables, including whether a player is a major leaguer versus minor leaguer, placement on the 40-man roster, and whether a player chose to "live in," as it's called when a player lives in the team hotel, or "live out," when a player lives in housing he finds for himself. Living out, for example, brings in an additional $32 a day in meal money. For a player with a family, even if he's on the 40-man roster, spring training can be more challenging.

"For most minor leaguers with a family, they pay to play," said Greg Norton.

"I think almost every guy in this clubhouse would prefer to have their family here with them," said reliever Jeff Ridgway. "That's why a lot of guys do it, whether they have the money or not, because it matters that much to have your kids and your wife here."

Ridgway estimated that renting a basic "family oriented" house in Orlando, with a pool, costs $3,000 to $3,500 a month. Some families pay much more, up to $10,000 a month if they're in a resort with extra fees.

"We do get paid down here, too," said Ridgway, "and we get an envelope of meal money every week. As soon as it began to be affordable for me, I brought my wife, Kelli. It's never really affordable, but it was enough for me to feel comfortable."

Outfielder Josh Anderson and his wife, Heather, have a home in Kentucky and a home in the Atlanta area to pay for.

"My parents rent us our house in Kentucky, and the rent's pretty good," he said, smiling. "But we have to pay for the house in Atlanta, and the place (in Orlando). You get good meal money in camp and, for us, that goes toward meals here and bills back at home."

This spring season, the Andersons spent $6,000, total, for a house with a small pool. They moved in on Feb. 19 and moved out Mar. 30. The house isn't in a resort, so there are no amenities associated with it, such as housekeeping, golf, tennis, but they have privacy and room for family that visited during spring training. They say the expense is worth it.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

"I'll sacrifice some things," said Anderson, "but having Heather with me and living in a decent place are things I try to do."

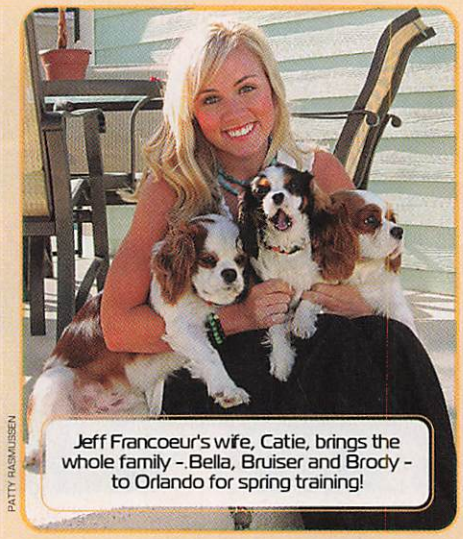
The Ridgways ran into the complication of a child in school keeping the family apart during spring training. Undaunted, Kelli, who stayed at the couple's home in Summerville, S.C., near Charleston, packed up the three children, daughter Emily (6), and sons Carson (2) and Cade (1) each Friday after school and drove 400 miles to spend the weekends with Jeff. On Sundays, she and the kids made the reverse trip.

While in Orlando, Ridgway saved money on living expenses by staying with family who live in the area. And Kelli and the kids were able to visit for a blissful 10 days, Mar. 6-15, during Emily's spring break. But that was the last visit of the spring season. Kelli had major surgery scheduled for March 24. Attempting to earn a spot in the bullpen, Ridgway remained in Orlando while their parents stepped in to take care of Kelli and the kids during her recovery.

"I knew I'd have to be independent when I got married," said Kelli. "It's part of the business. It's important for him to be where he is."

The Braves have an unusual phenomenon on their team in that a number of players are from Atlanta and married women from the Atlanta area. Because Atlanta is relatively close to Orlando (roughly 440 miles), many of the young wives pack their belongings, and pets, and travel south to stay with their husbands during spring training.

Jeff and Catie Francoeur, Brian and Ashley McCann, and Clint and Meredith Sammons all grew up in the metro Atlanta area and live there during the off-season. And, by design, they're all lived in Reunion, a resort complex 10 minutes from the spring training complex.



PATTY RASMUSSEN

Jeff Francoeur's wife, Catie, brings the whole family - Bella, Bruiser and Brody - to Orlando for spring training!

"We chose to live at Reunion since the Francoeurs and McCanns are here," said Meredith. "We said, 'Let's just bite the bullet and do it,' and it's been totally worth it. The guys can play golf together in the afternoons. We're just 15 minutes from Celebration, where Blaine and Ginsey Boyer and Kelly and Lauren Johnson live, and really close to the park. We all hang together, so it's been great."

The Sammons live in a 4-bedroom house with a small pool, and they were fortunate to get it because they hadn't heard Jaena Norton's advice. They own a 90-pound Great Dane named "Jack," whose size kept them from finding a place for over a month.

"The Boyers got the last house in Celebration that allowed larger dogs," said Meredith.

The Boyers lived in a condo above the Market Street shops in Celebration in the past, but this year had a house lined up just three doors down from the Johnsons. However, the day they were to send their check, the landlord called and backed out, leaving them in a serious lurch with little over one month to find a place. Through friends of friends, they were able to secure the large house in Celebration where they live with their dogs, "Goose" and "Nolan."

"Being down here is a huge expense. Period," said Ginsey. "We set aside money during the season to help pay for it."

But it's an expense they're willing to accept to keep their family together.

"Neither of us work well apart from one another," she said. "We decided from the get-go this is what we would do while we can."

The Francoeurs have a 4-bedroom house that Catie cozied up with pictures, books and other items from home. A portion of the refrigerator door is covered with family photos, and their three dogs, "Brody," "Bella," and "Bruiser," eat out of the same personalized bowls they eat from at home in Atlanta.

In addition to their clothing, Catie packed their files from home, their computer, printer and fax, and enough prescription dog food for two months. The whole family loves their spring training home, the quiet neighborhood and laid back days.

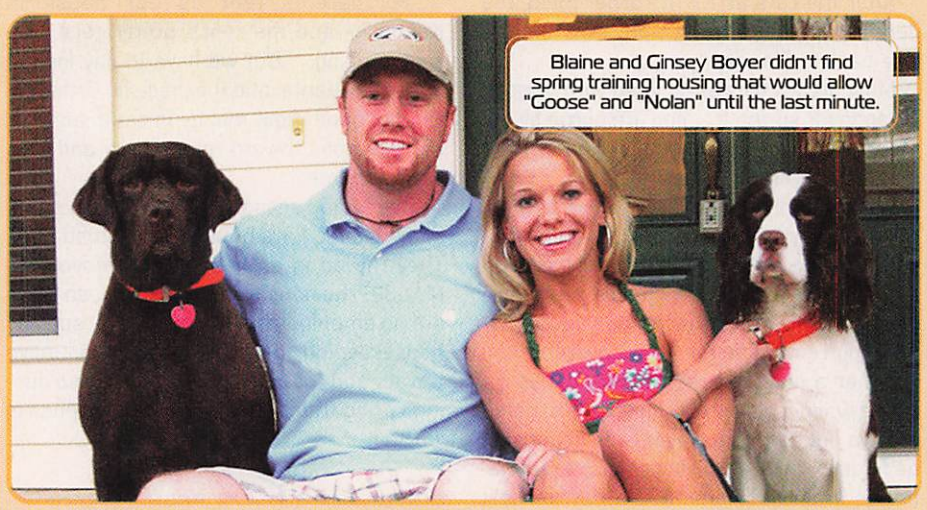
"Spring training is the closest thing to a normal lifestyle," said Catie. "Jeff is up early in the morning and goes to the ballpark. I get up with him and have breakfast, take the dogs for a walk, have a quiet time, and in the afternoon go to baseball games. He's usually home for dinner, and we're asleep by 10:30 at night."

The younger couples socialize frequently. On Feb. 21, a group of players and wives went to dinner to celebrate Brian McCann's and Kelly Johnson's birthdays. They got together on Tuesday nights for American Idol watching parties that involved a themed dinner with everyone contributing to the meal.

Meredith Sammons takes Jack for a daily walk in Celebration, often meeting with Ginsey Boyer and her dogs. Many of the wives, whether "young marrieds" or "married with children," participate in a weekly Bible study and got together on their own at the pool, theme parks, and, of course, at the ballpark.

Despite the challenges and expense in bringing a family to spring training, the wives and players feel it's their best option for keeping their family close.

"It's too long for the kids to be away from their dad at this age," said Jaena. "Being a family is our priority. We would come to spring training no matter if we're living in a 1-bedroom apartment or a 4-bedroom house. It's that important."



PATTY RASMUSSEN

Blaine and Ginsey Boyer didn't find spring training housing that would allow "Goose" and "Nolan" until the last minute.

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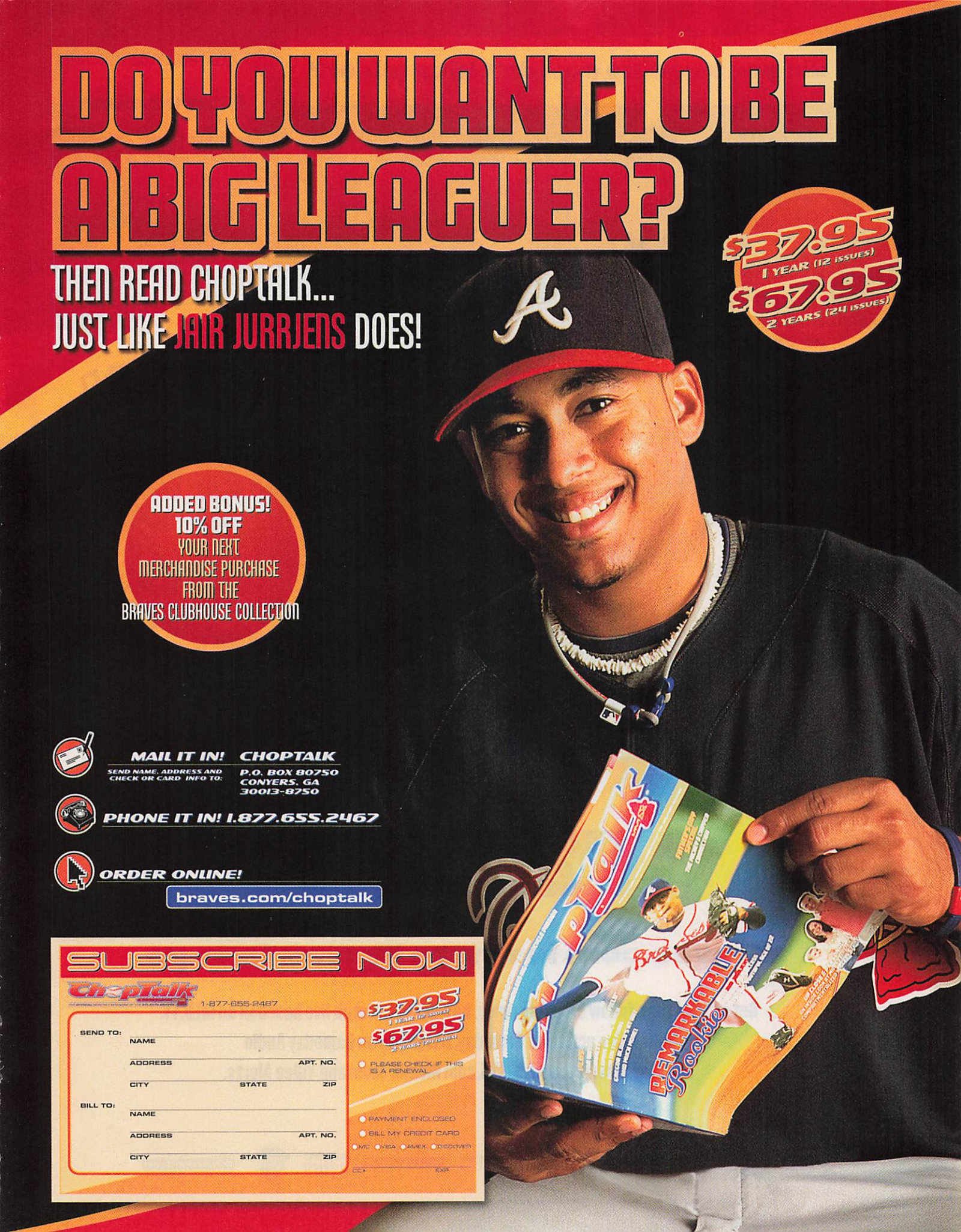

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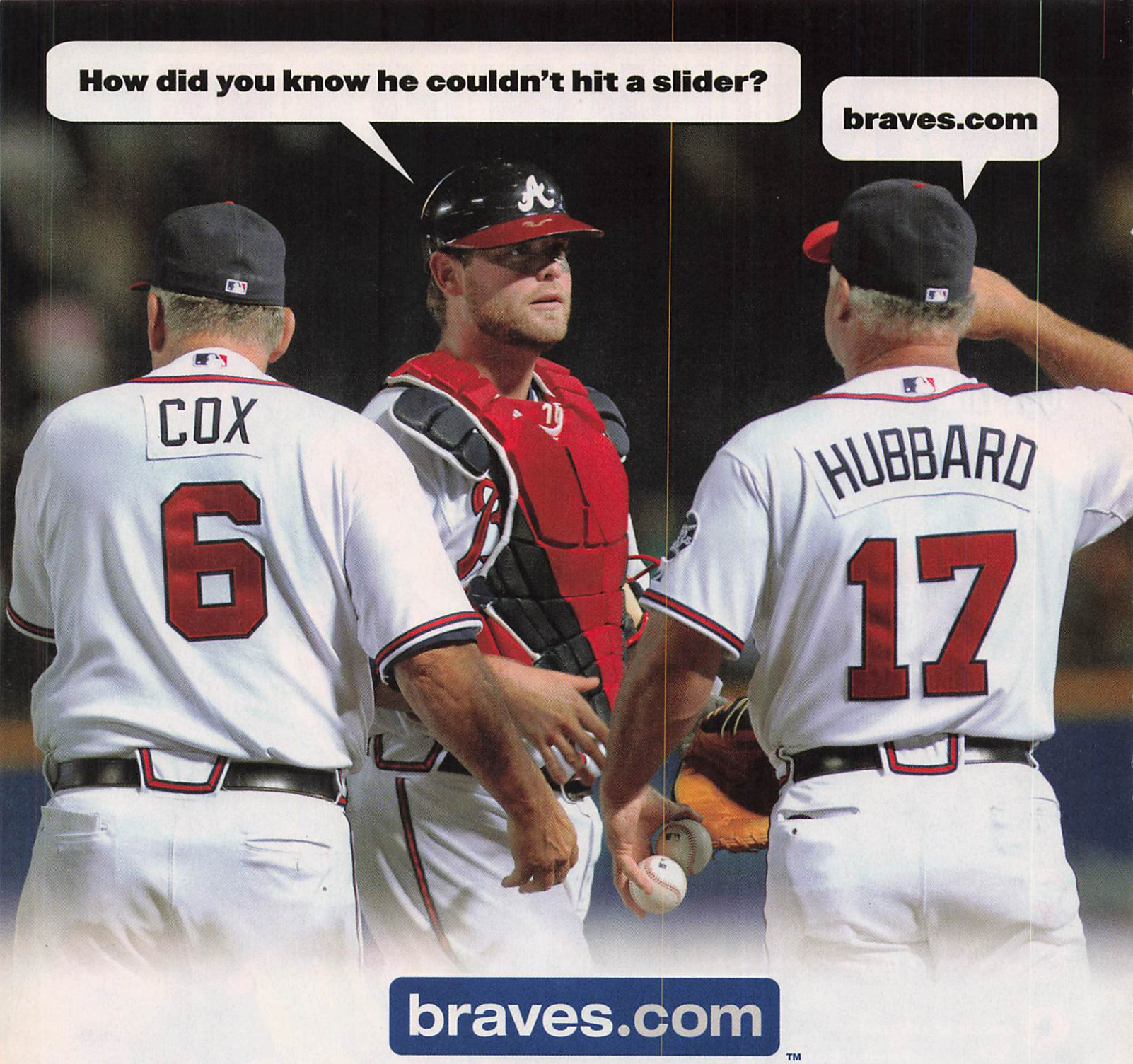

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MIDDLE MAN

Speedy Josh Anderson Appears To Have The Edge In Winning The Center-Field Job

BY MARK BOWMAN
OF MLB.COM

HAVING ALREADY SPENT one year in the Braves organization, Josh Anderson feels much different than he did at this time last year, when he was attempting to prove himself to a new set of coaches and teammates.

Now, the outfielder who was acquired from Houston in exchange for reliever Oscar Villarreal in November 2007, can only hope that his fate also proves different than last year, when he spent the majority of the regular season with Triple-A Richmond.

"It was tough," Anderson said about not making the Braves' Opening Day roster. "It was like getting the wind knocked out of you. I knew the best thing for me was to just have a good attitude. You can either go down [to the minors] and be really bitter, and things can snowball for you, or you can keep your head up and try to prove to people that you belong in the [majors].

"At this point when I look back, it was a blessing [to go to Richmond] because I got to go back, have a good season, play for a great manager [Dave Brundage] and be around our hitting coach, Chris Chambliss. I feel like I improved and matured as a player."

On his way to becoming an International League post-season All-Star, Anderson hit .314, was successful in 42 of 49 stolen-base attempts, and enjoyed a torrid second half that was highlighted by an all-time Richmond record 27-game hitting streak.

While enjoying such success, Anderson continued to point toward his current position, which has him in line to begin the season as Atlanta's starting centerfielder and leadoff man.

Highly regarded prospect Jordan Schafer, only 22 years old, also had a shot at the center-field job. However, a sprained right shoulder hindered his progress in spring training, and that combined with his youth and lack of experience likely will land him at Triple-A Gwinnett to start the season.

"It's a little more relaxing this go-round, although I don't take the competition lightly," Anderson said. "By no means am I sitting back on my heels and not putting forth any more effort. I've approached every camp the past three years the same - try to win a spot and do whatever I can."

ATLANTA BRAVES

Josh Anderson, who stole 42 bases in 49 attempts and had a 27-game hitting streak at Triple-A Richmond last year, could give the Braves critical speed in the leadoff spot in the batting order if he wins the center-field job.

Anderson's odds of beginning the year in Atlanta are enhanced by the fact that he's out of minor league options. In addition, he stands as the best speed threat the Braves have possessed since Rafael Furcal. The 26-year-old outfielder has been successful in 81 percent of his stolen-base attempts at the professional level, and last year, he quieted the critics who have described him as a left-handed slap hitter who can't hit lefty pitchers.

During the 2007 season with Triple-A Round Rock, Anderson batted .247 with a .278 on-base percentage in 150 at-bats against lefthanders. Last year at Richmond, Anderson batted .338 with a .375 on-base percentage in 142 at-bats against southpaws.

"I felt just as confident against lefties last year as I did righties," said Anderson, who has posted a .314 on-base percentage against lefthanders during his minor league career. "I think the more that you see them, like we did last year, you're forced to feel more comfortable against them."

Because of Anderson's speed, Bobby Cox believes the outfielder can find more consistency against left-handed pitchers by simply putting the ball in play with greater regularity. With that in mind, the Braves attempted to enhance his bunting skills during the spring.

Anderson, a fourth-round draft pick by Houston in 2003, batted .500 in 34 bunt attempts during the 2007 season. While with Richmond last year, he recorded five singles in 15 bunt attempts.

"We just want him to focus on putting the ball in play," Cox said. "If you put it in play, amazing things can happen with a left-handed hitter like him who can fly."

When Anderson arrived at spring training last year, he admittedly placed too much pressure on himself. This year, he's carrying a determined and more relaxed approach, while looking forward to the chance to prove he has the ability to provide Chipper Jones and the middle of the Braves lineup with run-producing opportunities on a consistent basis.

"I feel confident," Anderson said. "Some people look at being out of options as a bad thing, but I look at it as a good thing for me, because I feel I'm ready to contribute at this level. I'm ready. Obviously, everybody is fighting for a spot, but I feel at this stage of my career, I'm ready to step up and get a chance."

BY BILL BALLEW

GWINNETT STADIUM NEARLY SET FOR HISTORIC APRIL 17 OPENING

The turf, grown on a sod farm in Alabama, was installed in early March, one of the last major steps to prepare for the stadium opening.

BILL BALLEW

ASK MOST FANS when professional baseball started in Atlanta, and their answer will be 1966, the year the Braves moved from Milwaukee.

The correct response, however, dates to the mid-1880s, including a continuous run since 1902, when the team known mostly as the Crackers played in the Southern Association through 1961. The Atlanta team then spent four years in the International League as the Braves' Triple-A affiliate prior to relocating to Richmond upon the big league club's shift to the South.

More than four decades later, that same minor league franchise is returning to its roots. After 43 seasons in Richmond, the Triple-A club will open the 2009 season as the Gwinnett Braves. The result will give fans in the metro Atlanta area the best of both worlds - a major league franchise in downtown and a team with several of the organization's top prospects polishing their skills in the suburbs.

"The whole minor league concept is new here, and it's creating a lot of interest and attention," said Courtney Lawson, manager of public and community affairs for the Gwinnett Braves. "Fans are curious about the ballpark, but there's also a lot of players moving through the system who could be here. We wish them all the best, but it would be great if Tommy Hanson or Jordan Schafer were here to open the season."

Hanson and Schafer were not the only top prospects expected to see activity at Gwinnett this season. Other strong candidates include pitchers Kris Medlen, Stephen Marek and Luis Valdez.

Dave Brundage returns for his third season at the Braves' Triple-A manager, and is joined by pitching coach Derek Botelho and hitting coach Jamie Dismuke.

"Opening a new ballpark is a great experience, and being right there in Atlanta is going to make for an outstanding situation for the players who wind up going between the two teams," said Dismuke, who turned down the managerial job at Class A Dayton to join the Braves' farm system. "Theoretically, a player could be in uniform in Atlanta an hour after he receives the call. And the best part is the player won't have to move or worry about the lease with an apartment. He can live in the same place regardless of which team he's playing for."

Minor league teams rarely have the ability to market their players due to the high turnover associated with their rosters. While that situation could prove to be a little different in Gwinnett, the overall experience of attending a Triple-A game will have its contrasts to the action at Turner Field.

Gwinnett Braves general manager Bruce Baldwin and his staff are tight-lipped about many of the details, particularly those surrounding Opening Night, scheduled for Friday, April 17, at 7 p.m. against the Norfolk Tides. There will be several of the

HOME OPENERS

Team	Date	Time	Opponent
Gwinnett	April 17	7 p.m.	Norfolk
Mississippi	April 9	7:05 p.m.	Carolina
Myrtle Beach	April 9	7:05 p.m.	Wilmington
Rome	April 14	7 p.m.	Savannah

typical minor league promotions, including '70s Night (June 25) and Totally '80s Night (July 25), as well as entertaining appearances by the Zoopstars (May 24) and the San Diego Chicken (June 26). Fans can also expect fireworks, dizzy bat races, family fun Sundays, and even haircuts at the ballpark.

Yet for all of the hoopla taking place in and around the baseball game, there will be nothing "minor league" about the new ballpark. While the headlines scream about the loss of jobs throughout the United States, there was no lack of work taking place throughout the first three months of 2009 at what is being called Gwinnett Stadium. Approximately 500 construction workers were on the site every day, with many arriving as early as 6 a.m. and some remaining several hours after sunset.

"This ballpark is going up at the speed of light and faster than it should," said Baldwin, who also coordinated the building of stadiums in Greenville, S.C., and Richmond from 1983-85. "It is truly an amazing feat. Typically in today's world, it takes 18 to 24 months to build a ballpark. So, between the Braves' organization, the construction firm Barton Malow, the Gwinnett chamber, and the Gwinnett government, it has been an amazing accomplishment. We're fortunate because everybody is on the same page and working to accomplish one thing."

Only time will tell what makes the new ballpark special, but there are several distinguishing aspects associated with the G-Braves' stadium. The promenade upon entering the facility is large and open and can be transformed into a staging area. The berm in right field will give fans the chance to chase home runs. A seven-story scoreboard will loom over right-center field, while the Bullpen Terrace will be located high above the left-field fence. Concessions will be available throughout the ballpark, including traditional stands, a sports bar, and a food court that will include such offerings as Mexican meals and barbecue.

"This is a circular ballpark, meaning you can walk all the way around it and see the game, regardless of where you are," Baldwin said. "With the Bullpen Terrace, it's not your typical seating area. We're stealing a page from Boston's Fenway Park and the seating atop the Green Monster with high-top tables and chairs. We will have lots of unique seating opportunities, which in many ways will give fans a difference experience, depending upon where

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

I'M MORE MENTALLY PREPARED THIS YEAR

EDITOR'S NOTE

The Braves' first-round draft pick in 2007 out of nearby McDonough, Ga., 6-foot-4, 220-pound Jason Heyward is considered to be one of the premier prospects in the minor leagues. After spending his first full professional season at Rome in 2008 (.323/11/52), the 19-year-old rightfielder was among a small group of minor leaguers the Braves invited to spring training with the major league club.

SPRING TRAINING has been going well, and I'm having a good time being in big league camp. It's a great atmosphere, particularly for a young player, to get ready for the season.

I've been picking some guys' brains, trying to learn anything and everything I can. At the same time, I know I have work to do to prepare for the upcoming season. But with this being my first time in big league camp, I'm trying to take it all in while making the most of the opportunity.

One thing I'm surprised about is how many people are willing to help and offer their assistance, even to a young player like me. Everybody has been very open and hands-on in terms of offering advice and getting in some extra practice.

If I need something, I ask and someone is always willing to help. I feel comfortable asking anyone at any point in time if I have a question or if I need to do something that will help me become a better player.

I had confidence going into spring training, even though I didn't know exactly what to expect. One thing that has made it easier has been having a guy like Freddie Freeman around. We were together last year at Rome, so we're in the same situation here.

> "I'M TRYING TO DO EVERYTHING I CAN TO MAKE THE MOST OF THE OPPORTUNITY I'VE BEEN GIVEN."

We've been comparing notes and picking one another's brains, trying to keep one another up during those times when we might struggle. We've talked about how fortunate we are to be around the best players in the game and to see what they do to get ready for a game and for the season. I believe we're both learning by watching, which should make us better players now and in the future.

I didn't do too much different in terms of preparing for this season. Last year was my first season, and I reflected a lot over the winter on the challenges I faced last year. Because of that experience, I feel I'm more mentally prepared heading into this season than I was last year.

I felt last season was a good start, a good building point in my career. I feel like I learned a lot and I had a good time doing it.

I really didn't know what to expect heading into my first (full) season of pro ball. I knew the Braves have a long history of bringing up guys through the farm system, and I realize now that a big reason for that are the coaching staffs in the minor leagues.

The coaches and the rovers (roving instructors) do everything they possibly can to help us out, and they're great guys.

I started thinking about playing professional baseball when I was about 10 years old. I decided I wanted to keep playing baseball because I had some success and I had a lot of fun doing it. I'm beginning to feel like I'm on my way.

Leading up to the draft (in 2007), I was like any other player who simply wanted to go as high as possible. When it happened to be the Braves who drafted me (with the 14th overall pick), I couldn't have been any happier.

I feel very fortunate to be in this organization. The Braves take care of their players. You can see that with the ballparks we have, along with the coaching staffs. I feel it's a privilege to be here, and I'm trying to do everything I can to make the most of the opportunity I've been given.

Gwinnett Braves general manager Bruce Baldwin moved with the Triple-A affiliate from Richmond and now has coordinated the building of three ballparks for the franchise.

BILL BALLEW

CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

they are sitting on a particular night."

In designing the ballpark, the exterior was taken from old Gwinnett and the local warehouses that were common in the area during the first half of the 20th century. It includes a Georgia brick façade and small glass windows of different hues that create a prism effect when light shines through. The seating was designed to get fans as close to the action as possible, resulting in a single tier consisting of 7,100 seats between the foul poles. The upper deck features 22 suites, the press box, and special decks on either end, including one reserved for the youth league team of the night along the third-base line.

The diamond, meanwhile, has the same dimensions as Turner Field - 335 feet down the left field line, 330 feet down the right field line, and 400 feet to straightaway center. Precision Turf, a Gwinnett-based company, installed the infield, which was grown on a sod farm in Alabama, on Mar. 2, and the outfield grass was laid on Mar. 5. According to Precision Turf's Jonathan Holland, underneath the grass is a 10-inch profile of sand on top of four inches of pea gravel and four-inch drains that were placed 10-15 feet apart, all of which should help make rainouts few and far between.

Despite all of the work taking place less than a mile east of I-85 along Buford Drive, Baldwin knows many have doubted whether the ballpark would be ready for the first scheduled home game. The veteran general manager simply laughed at such statements while focusing instead on what will be awaiting the fans and players.

"It will be difficult for people in Gwinnett to judge it against any other stadium unless they've been to lots of minor league parks," Baldwin said. "I will tell you boastfully that everyone in Gwinnett, Atlanta and Georgia should be proud of this ballpark, because it speaks volumes about the community. It will be uniquely theirs, and it will be remarkably functional."

GLOBAL SIGNINGS

The Braves were active again during the first two months of 2009, following the Jan. 2 start of the international signing period. Johnny Almaraz, Atlanta's director of international scouting and operations, and his staff signed a total of 14 players, including five from the Dominican Republic, four from Panama, three from Venezuela and two from Mexico.

All 14 players have reported to the Braves' academy in the Dominican Republic, with two of the newcomers making an immediate impression. Even though right-handed pitcher Robinson Lopez and outfielder Miguel Hipolito only recently celebrated their 17th birthdays, both have demonstrated the type of skills that could earn them trips to the United States for extended spring training and spots on Atlanta's Gulf Coast League team this summer.

Lopez has displayed excellent command of three pitches, highlighted by a 92-96 mph fastball. According to the Braves, the 6-foot-1 signee is aggressive on the mound and, for such a young pitcher, has an excellent feel for setting up hitters. Hipolito, a centerfielder who could be a classic leadoff hitter, has all the tools scouts look for in a solid all-around player. He runs very well and shows above-average strength that should continue to improve.

"Those two kids are both from the Dominican, and they have really exploded in terms of their talent since we signed them," Almaraz said. "We discovered Lopez early, and I believe we were the only club that knew about him. Hipolito also wasn't well known, but the abilities those two have shown us in a short period of time has been very impressive."

ORGANIZATION NOTES

The Braves were well represented in the World Baseball Classic. In addition to major leaguers Manny Acosta (Panama), Gregor Blanco (Venezuela), Jorge Campillo (Mexico), Javier Vazquez (Puerto Rico) and Chipper Jones and Brian McCann (United States), four Atlanta minor leaguers made the final rosters of other countries for the March tournament. Pitchers Scott Diamond and Bryan Dumesnil were among those representing Canada. Pitcher Yeliar Castro, as well as outfielder Concepcion Rodriguez, played for their native Panama.

A trio of former Braves pitching prospects also participated, including left-handers Jung Bong (Korea), Damian Moss (Australia) and Bruce Chen (Panama)...

Five Braves were named on Baseball America's annual Top 100 list of minor league prospects, headed by pitcher Tommy Hanson and rightfielder Jason Heyward at numbers four and five, respectively. The trade publication also rated centerfielder Jordan Schafer 42nd, centerfielder Gorkys Hernandez 62nd, and first baseman Freddie Freeman 87th. Also receiving strong consideration for the list were pitchers Jeff Locke, Kris Medlen, Cole Rohrbough and Julio Teheran...

The Braves bought the contract of catcher Craig Maddox from the New Jersey Jackals of the independent Cam-Am League on Mar. 8. The 23-year-old Maddox batted .248 with five home runs and 32 RBIs last year for the Jackals after starting his professional career in 2007 in the Detroit Tigers' organization. A resident of Locust, Ga., Maddox was the 2007 NCCAA Division II National Player of the Year during his senior season at Southeastern University.

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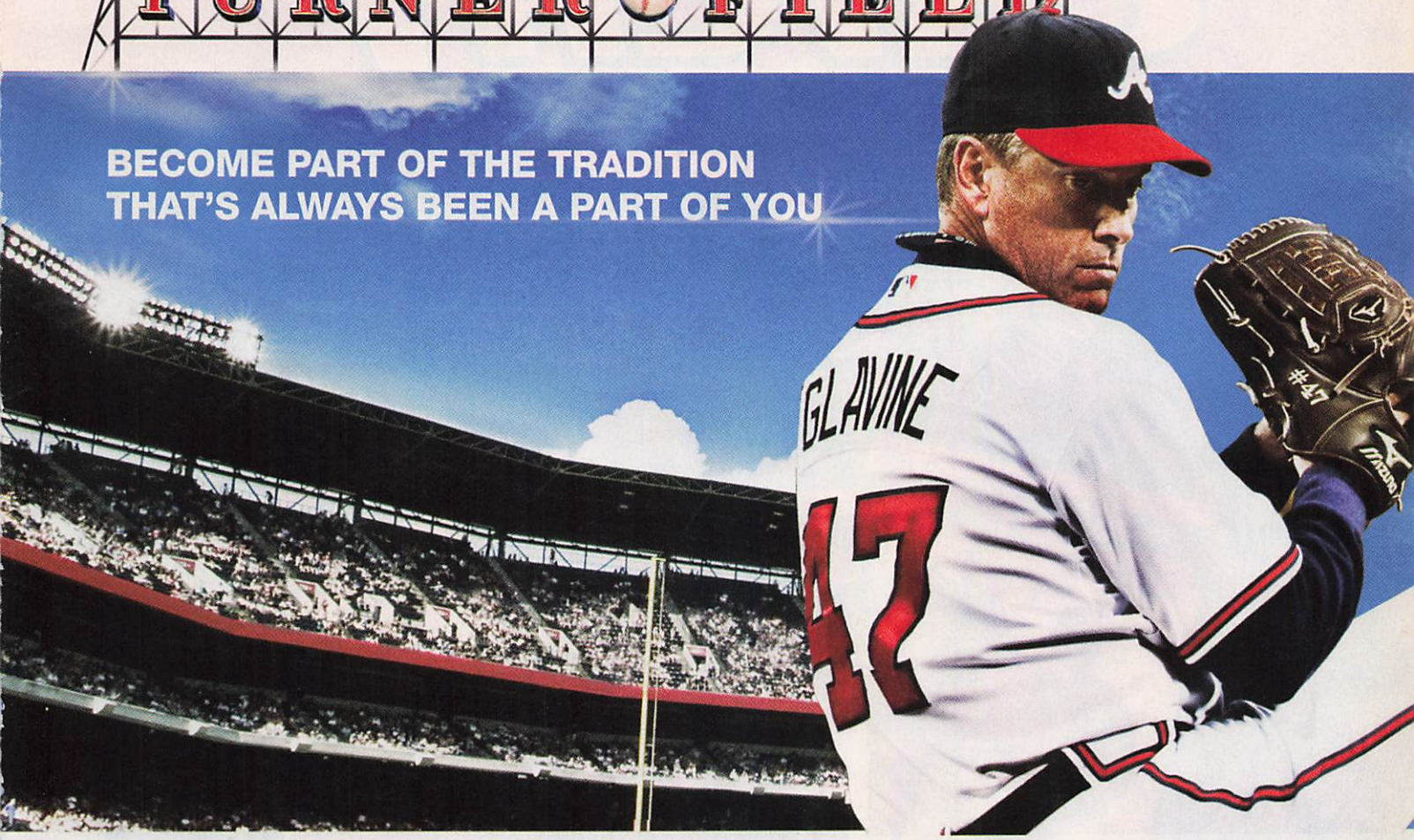

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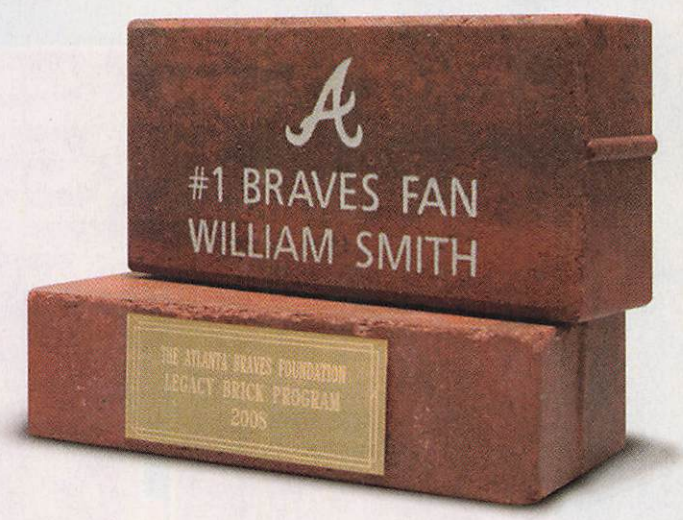

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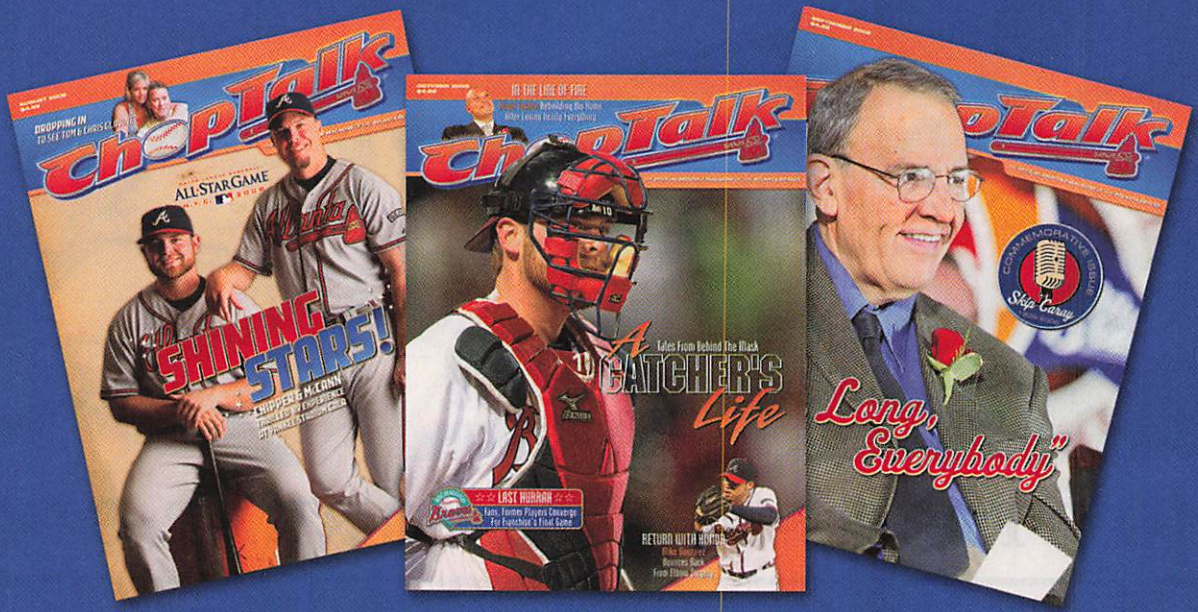

April 2005	Starting Rotation
May 2005	Andruw Jones
June 2005	Tim Hudson
July 2005	Kyle Davies
August 2005	Johnson & Langerhans
September 2005	Jeff Francoeur
October 2005	Andruw Jones
November 2005	Brian McCann
December 2005	Andruw Jones
January 2006	Edgar Renteria
February 2006	Niekro, Aaron, Lemaster
March 2006	LaRoche Family
April 2006	Andruw, Smoltz, Chipper
May 2006	Chris Reitsma
June 2006	Francoeur's Slam
July 2006	Edgar Renteria

August 2006	Brian McCann
September 2006	Bob Wickman
October 2006	John Smoltz
November 2006	Bobby Cox
December 2006	Jeff Francoeur
January 2007	Rafael Soriano
February 2007	Spring Training
March 2007	Mike Gonzalez
April 2007	Andruw Jones (Sold Out)
May 2007	Hubbard & Johnson (Sold Out)
June 2007	John Smoltz
July 2007	Diaz & Harris
August 2007	Edgar Renteria
September 2007	Mark Teixeira
October 2007	Jeff Francoeur
November 2007	Chipper Jones

December 2007	John Smoltz
January 2008	Tom Glavine
February 2008	Tim Hudson
March 2008	Mark Kotsay
April 2008	Teixeira & Jones
May 2008	Brian McCann
June 2008	Jair Jurrjens
July 2008	Chipper Jones
August 2008	McCann & Jones
September 2008	Skip Caray
October 2008	Brian McCann
November 2008	Chipper Jones
December 2008	Pete Van Wieren
January 2009	Frank Wren
February 2009	Hank Aaron
March 2009	Derek Lowe

Braves RADIO NETWORK

Call Letters	Dial	Market	State
WBNM	1050	Alexander City	AL
WAUD	1230	Auburn	AL
WKNU	106.3	Brewton	AL
WGNQ	1480	Bridgeport	AL
WGNQ	97.7	Bridgeport	AL
WEIS	990	Centre	AL
WKUL	92.1	Cullman	AL
WGMK	106.3	Dothan	AL
WYTK	93.9	Florence	AL
WHEP	1310	Foley	AL
WTWX	93.9	Guntersville	AL
WGSV	1270	Guntersville	AL
WJLX	1240	Jasper	AL
WWIC	1050	Scottsboro	AL
WACQ	1340	Tallassee	AL
WACQ	101.1	Tallassee	AL
WAAZ	104.7	Crestview	FL
WJSB	1050	Crestview	FL
WRUF	850	Gainesville	FL
WLTG	1430	Panama City	FL
WALG	1590	Albany	GA
WGPC	1450	Albany	GA
WISK	98.7	Americus	GA
WISK	1390	Americus	GA
WGAU	1340	Athens	GA
WRFC	960	Athens	GA
WKLS	96.1	Atlanta	GA
WGST	640	Atlanta	GA
WWVA	105.7	Atlanta	GA
WGAC	580	Augusta	GA
WGAC	93.1	Augusta	GA
WRDW	1630	Augusta	GA
WFNS	1350	Blackshear	GA
WBBK	1260	Blakely	GA
WSFN	790	Brunswick	GA
WJTH	900	Calhoun	GA
WJTH	101.7	Calhoun	GA
WBTR	92.1	Carrollton	GA
WLBB	1330	Carrollton	GA
WCLA	1470	Claxton	GA
WDXQ	98.3	Cochran	GA
WRCG	1420	Columbus	GA
WQXZ	98.3	Cordele	GA
WCON	99.3	Cornelia	GA
WCON	1450	Cornelia	GA
WYYU	104.5	Dalton	GA
WBLJ	1230	Dalton	GA
WSEM	1500	Donalsonville	GA
WDMG	860	Douglas	GA
WDMG	97.9	Douglas	GA
WMLT	1330	Dublin	GA
WSGC	1400	Elberton	GA
WSGC	92.1	Elberton	GA
WLJA	93.5	Ellijay	GA
WPGY	1560	Ellijay	GA
WBHB	1240	Fitzgerald	GA
WDUN	550	Gainesville	GA
WGGA	1240	Gainesville	GA
WMJE	102.9	Gainesville	GA
WDDK	103.9	Greensboro	GA
WCEH	610	Hawkinsville	GA
WNGM	1230	Hiawassee	GA
WVOH	93.5	Hazelhurst	GA
WBTY	98.7	Homerville	GA
WIFO	105.5	Jesup	GA
WLOP	1370	Jesup	GA
WMGP	98.1	LaGrange/Newnan	GA
WVCC	720	LaGrange/Newnan	GA
WPEH	92.1	Louisville	GA
WPEH	1420	Louisville	GA
WIFN	105.5	Macon	GA
WMAC	940	Macon	GA
WKUN	1490	Monroe	GA
WMTM	1300	Moultrie	GA
WMTM	93.9	Moultrie	GA
WCOH	1400	Newnan	GA
WRGA	1470	Rome	GA
WSRM	95.3	Rome	GA
WSNT	99.9	Sandersville	GA
WSNT	1490	Sandersville	GA
WJLG	900	Savannah	GA
WBMQ	630	Savannah	GA
WMCD	107.3	Statesboro	GA
WWNS	1240	Statesboro	GA
WJAT	800	Swainsboro	GA
WRJS	1590	Swainsboro	GA
WZBX	106.5	Sylvania	GA
WSYL	1490	Sylvania	GA
WTGA	101.1	Thomaston	GA
WTGA	1590	Thomaston	GA
WPAX	1240	Thomasville	GA
WTIF	107.5	Tifton	GA
WNEG	630	Toccoa	GA
WKWN	1420	Trenton	GA
WKWN	106.1	Trenton	GA
WVLD	1450	Valdosta	GA
WVLD	106.9	Valdosta	GA
WVOP	970	Vidalia	GA
WYUM	101.7	Vidalia	GA
WRPG	103.9	Warner Robins	GA
WNNG	1350	Warner Robins	GA
WDBN	107.5	Wrightsville	GA
WJDX	620	Jackson	MS
WISE	1310	Asheville	NC
WYSE	970	Canton	NC
WAZZ	1490	Fayetteville	NC
WFSC	1050	Franklin	NC
WGNC	1450	Gastonia	NC
WBLO	790	High Point	NC
WLON	1590	Lincolnton	NC
WCNG	102.7	Murphy	NC
WCVP	600	Murphy	NC
WNOS	1450	New Bern	NC
WCVP	95.9	Robbinsville	NC
WCAB	590	Rutherfordton	NC
WSTP	1490	Salisbury	NC
WADA	730	Shelby	NC
WRGC	680	Sylva	NC
WCAM	1590	Camden	SC
WPUB	102.7	Camden	SC
WQSC	1340	Charleston	SC
WQNT	1450	Charleston	SC
WHAT	1560	Clemson	SC
WPCC	1410	Clinton	SC
WCOS	1400	Columbia	SC
WFIS	1600	Fountain Inn	SC
WCCP	104.9	Greenville	SC
WSNW	1150	Seneca	SC
WSPG	1400	Spartanburg	SC
WBCU	1460	Union	SC
WALI	93.7	Walterboro	SC
WSAA	93.1	Benton	TN
WCLE	104.1	Calhoun	TN
WDEF	1370	Chattanooga	TN
WJZM	1400	Clarksville	TN
WBAC	1340	Cleveland	TN
WXSM	640	Johnson City	TN
WGOC	1320	Kingsport	TN
WLIL	730	Lenoir City	TN
WJJM	1490	Lewisburg	TN
WMSR	1320	Manchester	TN
WMSR	105.1	Manchester	TN
WMSR	107.9	Manchester	TN
WCDZ	95.1	Martin	TN
WCMT	1410	Martin	TN
WGNS	1450	Murfreesboro	TN
WGNS	100.5	Murfreesboro	TN
WGNS	101.9	Murfreesboro	TN
WGFX	104.5	Nashville	TN
WLIK	1270	Newport	TN
WPFT	106.7	Pigeon Forge	TN
WAYA	93.9	Spring City	TN
WVOW	101.9	Logan	WV
WVOW	1290	Logan	WV

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Single game tickets - with the exception of the June 23-25 series with the Yankees and the June 26-28 series with the Red Sox - are available at braves.com/tickets, the Braves box office at Turner Field, by calling 1-800-326-4000, and at all TicketMaster outlets.

Tickets for the Yankees and Red Sox games are now available as part of various multi-game packages at savings of up to 27 percent and can be purchased at braves.com/tickets or by calling (404) 577-9100. Individual tickets for those games will go on sale at a later date.

LOCATION	PRICE*	PREMIUM#	SEASON+
Skyline@	$1	$1	NA
Upper Pavilion	$6	$6	$3
Upper Reserved	$8	$12	NA
Upper Box	$12	$16	$10
Field/Terrace Pavilion	$22	$26	$12
Terrace Reserved	$24	$28	$22
Field Reserved	$26	$30	$24
Club Pavilion	$28	$32	$26
Terrace Level	$36	$40	$30
Field Level	$36	$40	$30
Club Level	$38	$42	$34
Dugout Level	$60	$64	$52
Henry Aaron Seats	$70	$74	$60

* Excluding June 23-25.
# All Friday and Saturday regular season games.
+ Season ticket price per game.
@ Available 3 hours before game at Turner Field box office.

GROUP TICKETS

Per ticket discounts are available to groups of 20 or more.
Call (404) 577-9100 for information.

FLEX PLANS

Priced as low as $99 (9 games/upper box location). Pick as few as 9 games or as many as 83 games and save up to $6 per ticket.

Exchange tickets up to 24 hours prior to start of any game in your plan.

Location	Regular/Premium	Flex Price	Yankees/Red Sox	Flex Price
Golden Moon Casino	$38/$42	$37	$48	$42
Terrace	$36/$40	$35	$46	$40
Field/Terrace Pavilion	$22/$26	$21	$32	$26
Upper Box	$12/$16	$11	$22	$16

6-GAME PACKS

Terrace Level	$220 per seat
Outfield Pavilion	$136 per seat
Upper Box	$76 per seat

OPTION 1

April 11	Washington
May 1	Houston
June 25	Yankees
June 28	Red Sox
Aug. 22	Florida
Sept. 19	Philadelphia

YANKEES PACKAGE

June 23	Yankees
June 24	Yankees
June 25	Yankees
July 23	San Francisco
Aug. 23	Florida
Sept. 20	Philadelphia

RED SOX PACKAGE

June 26	Red Sox
June 27	Red Sox
June 28	Red Sox
Aug. 16	Philadelphia
Aug. 27	San Diego
Sept. 17	Mets

15-GAME PLAN

SECTION	PRICE PER SEAT
Terrace	$495
Field Reserved	$375
Outfield Pavilion	$270
Upper Box	$165

GAMES:

April 10	(7:30 p.m. vs. Nats)
April 11	(7 p.m. vs. Nats)
May 2	(3:30 p.m. vs. Astros)
May 16	(7 p.m. vs. D'backs)
May 23	(7 p.m. vs. Jays)
June 6	(7 p.m. vs. Brewers)
June 24	(7 p.m. vs. Yankees)
June 27	(4 p.m. vs. Red Sox)
July 18	(4 p.m. vs. Mets)
Aug. 1	(4 p.m. vs. Dodgers)
Aug. 15	(4 p.m. vs. Phillies)
Aug. 22	(7 p.m. vs. Marlins)
Sept. 5	(7 p.m. vs. Reds)
Sept. 15	(7 p.m. vs. Phillies)
Oct. 3	(7 p.m. vs. Nats)

20-GAME PLANS

Get the same seat for every pre-selected game in the Field Level ($640 for 20 games) or Lexus Level ($720 for 20 games). Four different packages available (visit braves.com to see specific dates):

MURPHY PLAN

Variety of Tuesday and Friday games.

COX PLAN

Variety of Wednesday and Saturday games.

NIEKRO PLAN

Variety of Thursday and Sunday games.

SPAHN PLAN

Variety of key matchup weekday games.

TICKET SPECIALS

* $1 Skyline Seats – Available three hours before every game at the Turner Field Box Office.
* Family Value Plan - 4 tickets, 4 hotdogs, 4 Cokes, a Braves yearbook, and a parking pass for as low as $59 (37 percent savings), available Sunday through Thursday (excluding June 23-25).
* Coca-Cola Two-For-One Tuesdays – Two Upper Reserved tickets for the price of one every Tuesday (excluding June 23-25).
* Two-For-One Wednesdays – Two Field/Terrace Pavilion tickets for the price of one every Wednesday (excluding June 23-25).
* ampm All You Can Eat Seats – For as low as $45, enjoy all the peanuts and crackerjacks, hotdogs, hamburgers, sodas, and more, for one low all-inclusive price.
* College, Military, and AAA Discount – Two Upper Box tickets for the price of one with a valid college or military ID or valid AAA member card (excluding June 23-28).
* Ultimate Kids Days – Tickets for all fans 14 and under are $5 on Sunday, June 7 and Sunday, Aug. 2. Young fans can also participate in pre-game parades around the field and be eligible to win several special experiences, including serving at the team's Honorary Team Captain or Guest Public Address Announcer.
* Publix Friday Night Fireworks (every Friday home game).
* All-Star Sundays (every Sunday home game): Kids run the bases, and Braves alumni autograph signings.

WEEKEND PLAN

Get the same location for 30 weekend games.

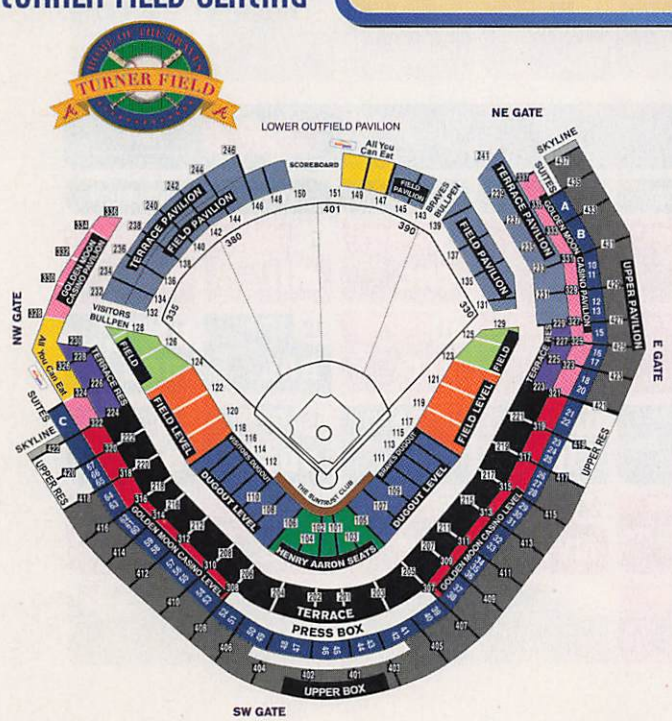
Field Level	$960
Golden Moon Casino	$1,080
Outfield Pavilion	$510
Upper Box	$330

HALF SEASON TICKET PLAN

Get the same location to 42 pre-selected games, including Opening Night, all Friday and Saturday games, and at least one game against all 2009 visiting teams.

Field Level	$1,344
Golden Moon Casino	$1,512
Outfield Pavilion	$714
Upper Box	$462

TURNER FIELD SEATING



4-GAME PACKS

TERRACE $140
OUTFIELD PAVILION $84
UPPER BOX $44

OPENING NIGHT

April 10 vs. Nats, May 2 vs. Astros, May 16 vs. D'backs, June 2 vs. Cubs

FRIDAY FIREWORKS

May 1 vs. Astros, May 22 vs. Jays, June 5 vs. Brewers, July 31 vs. Dodgers

SUMMER SATURDAYS

June 6 vs. Brewers, July 18 vs. Mets, Aug. 1 vs. Dodgers, Aug. 15 vs. Phillies

NL EAST

July 17 vs. Mets, Aug. 21 vs. Marlins, Sept. 19 vs. Phillies, Oct. 3 vs. Nats

TERRACE $145
OUTFIELD PAVILION $89
UPPER BOX $49

SUNDAY PACKAGE

June 28 vs. Red Sox, July 19 vs. Mets, Aug. 2 vs. Dodgers, Sept. 6 vs. Reds

SATURDAY PACKAGE

April 11 vs. Nats, May 23 vs. Jays, June 27 vs. Red Sox, Sept. 5 vs. Reds

THURSDAY PACKAGE

June 4 vs. Cubs, June 25 vs. Yankees, July 16 vs. Mets, Oct. 1 vs. Nats

EAST COAST FIREWORKS

June 26 vs. Red Sox, Aug. 14 vs. Phillies, Sept. 18 vs. Phillies, Oct. 2 vs. Nats

TUESDAY PACKAGE

June 23 vs. Yankees, June 30 vs. Phillies, July 21 vs. Giants, Sept. 15 vs. Mets

TERRACE $145
OUTFIELD PAVILION $59
UPPER BOX $49

WEDNESDAY PACKAGE

June 3 vs. Cubs, June 24 vs. Yankees, Aug. 12 vs. Nats, Aug. 26 vs. Padres

2009 SCHEDULE

FSSOUTH FSS

Peachtree TV PTV

SPORTSOUTH SPSO

ALL GAMES ON WGST-AM (640), 96.1-FM, AND BRAVES RADIO NETWORK AFFILIATES

GAME TIMES EASTERN
TENTATIVE; SUBJECT TO CHANGE
FOR SEASON, GROUP AND SUITE TICKET INFORMATION CALL (404) 577-9100

APRIL

Braves HOME AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
			1	2	3 7:00 PM EXIBITION DET	4 1:00 PM EXIBITION SPSO DET
5 8:00 PM SEASON OPENER PHI ESPN2	6	7 7:00 PM PTV PHI	8 3:00 PM SPSO PHI	9	10 7:30 PM HOME OPENER WSH PTV	11 7:00 PM PTV WSH
12 1:30 PM FSS WSH	13	14 7:00 PM PTV FLA	15 7:00 PM PTV FLA	16 12:00 PM SPSO FLA	17 7:00 PM SPSO PIT	18 12:30 PM SPSO PIT
19 1:30 PM FSS PIT	20 7:00 PM SPSO WSH	21 7:00 PM SPSO WSH	22 7:00 PM SPSO WSH	23	24 7:00 PM SPSO CIN	25 1:00 PM SPSO CIN
26 1:00 PM FSS CIN	27 7:00 PM PTV STL	28 7:00 PM PTV STL	29 7:00 PM PTV STL	30		

MAY

Braves HOME AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
					1 7:30 PM PTV HOU	2 3:30 PM FOX HOU
3 1:30 PM FSS HOU	4 7:00 PM PTV NYM	5 7:00 PM PTV NYM	6 7:00 PM SPSO FLA	7 12:00 PM SPSO FLA	8 7:00 PM PTV PHI	9 3:30 PM FOX PHI
10 1:30 PM FSS PHI	11 7:00 PM PTV NYM	12 7:00 PM SPSO NYM	13 1:00 PM SPSO NYM	14	15 7:30 PM PTV ARI	16 7:00 PM PTV ARI
17 1:30 PM FSS ARI	18 7:00 PM PTV COL	19 7:00 PM PTV COL	20 7:00 PM SPSO COL	21 7:00 PM SPSO COL	22 7:30 PM PTV TOR	23 7:00 PM PTV TOR
24 1:30 PM FSS TOR	25 4:00 PM SPSO SF	26 10:00 PM SPSO SF	27 10:00 PM SPSO SF	28 9:30 PM SPSO ARI	29 9:30 PM SPSO ARI	30 4:00 PM FOX ARI
31 4:00 PM FSS ARI						

JUNE

Braves HOME AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
	1	2 7:00 PM PTV CHC	3 7:00 PM PTV CHC	4 7:00 PM SPSO CHC	5 7:30 PM PTV MIL	6 7:00 PM PTV MIL
7 1:30 PM FSS MIL	8 7:00 PM SPSO PIT	9 7:00 PM PTV PIT	10 7:00 PM PTV PIT	11 1:00 PM SPSO PIT	12 7:00 PM SPSO BAL	13 7:00 PM SPSO BAL
14 1:30 PM FSS BAL	15	16 7:00 PM SPSO CIN	17 7:00 PM SPSO CIN	18 12:30 PM SPSO CIN	19 7:00 PM PTV BOS	20 7:00 PM PTV BOS
21 1:30 PM FSS BOS	22	23 7:00 PM PTV NYY	24 7:00 PM PTV NYY	25 7:00 PM PTV NYY	26 7:30 PM PTV BOS	27 4:00 PM FOX BOS
28 1:30 PM FSS BOS	29	30 7:00 PM PTV PHI				

2009 SCHEDULE

JULY

HOME AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
			1 7:00 PM PTV PHI	2 7:00 PM SPSO PHI	3 7:00 PM SPSO WAS	4 1:00 PM SPSO WAS
5 1:30 PM FSS WAS	6 8:00 PM CHC	7 8:00 PM SPSO CHC	8 2:00 PM SPSO CHC	9 8:30 PM SPSO COL	10 9:00 PM SPSO COL	11 8:00 PM SPSO COL
12 3:00 PM FSS COL	13	14 8:00 PM ST. LOUIS ALL-STAR GAME FOX	15	16 7:00 PM SPSO NYM	17 7:30 PM PTV MYM	18 4:00 PM FOX NYM
19 6:00 PM ESPN NYM	20 7:00 PM SPSO SF	21 7:00 PM PTV SF	22 7:00 PM PTV SF	23 1:00 PM SPSO SF	24 8:00 PM SPSO MIL	25 7:00 PM SPSO MIL
26 2:00 PM FSS MIL	27	28 7:00 PM SPSO FLA	29 7:00 PM SPSO FLA	30 7:00 PM SPSO FLA	31 7:30 PM PTV LA	

AUGUST

HOME AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
						1 4:00 PM FOX LA
2 1:30 PM FSS LA	3 10:00 PM SPSO SD	4 10:00 PM SPSO SD	5 3:30 PM SPSO SD	6 10:00 PM SPSO LA	7 10:00 PM SPSO LA	8 10:00 PM SPSO LA
9 4:00 PM FSS LA	10	11 7:00 PM PTV WAS	12 7:00 PM SPSO WAS	13	14 7:30 PM PTV PHI	15 4:00 PM FOX PHI
16 1:30 PM FSS PHI	17	18 7:00 PM SPSO NYM	19 7:00 PM SPSO NYM	20 7:00 PM SPSO NYM	21 7:30 PM PTV FLA	22 7:00 PM PTV FLA
23 1:30 PM FSS FLA	24	25 7:00 PM SPSO SD	26 7:00 PM SPSO SD	27 7:00 PM SPSO SD	28 7:00 PM SPSO PHI	29 7:00 PM SPSO PHI
30 1:30 PM FSS PHI	31 7:00 PM SPSO FLA					

SEPT./OCT.

HOME AWAY

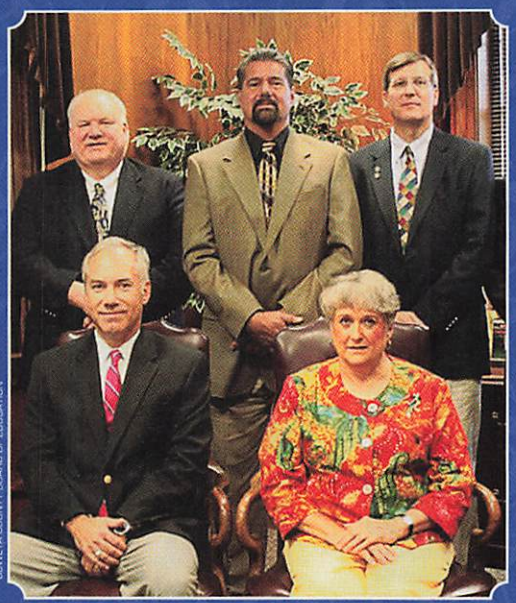
SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
		1 7:00 PM SPSO FLA	2 7:00 PM SPSO FLA	3 7:00 PM SPSO FLA	4 7:30 PM SPSO CIN	5 7:00 PM SPSO CIN
6 1:30 PM FSS CIN	7	8 8:00 PM SPSO HOU	9 8:00 PM SPSO HOU	10 8:00 PM SPSO HOU	11 8:00 PM SPSO STL	12 4:00 PM FOX STL
13 2:00 PM FSS STL	14	15 7:00 PM PTV NYM	16 7:00 PM PTV NYM	17 7:00 PM SPSO NYM	18 7:30 PM PTV PHI	19 7:00 PM PTV PHI
20 1:30 PM FSS PHI	21 7:00 PM SPSO NYM	22 7:00 PM SPSO NYM	23 7:00 PM NYM	24	25 7:00 PM SPSO WAS	26 1:00 PM SPSO WAS
27 1:30 PM FSS WAS	28 7:00 PM SPSO FLA	29 7:00 PM SPSO FLA	30 7:00 PM SPSO FLA	1 7:00 PM SPSO WAS	2 7:30 PM SPSO WAS	3 7:00 PM SPSO WAS
4 1:30 PM FSS WAS						

FS SOUTH — FSS

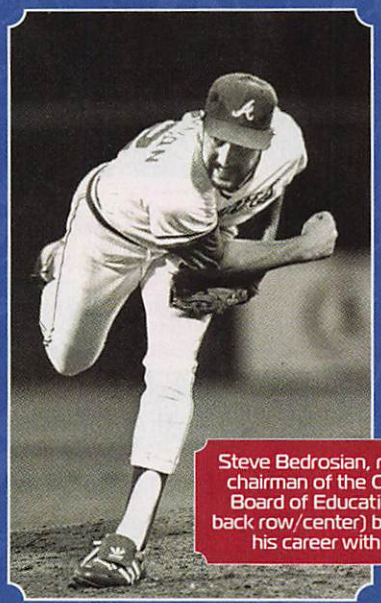
Peachtree TV — PTV

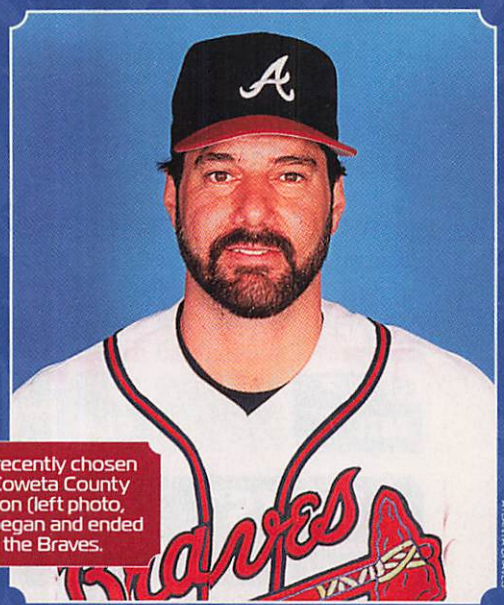
SPORTSOUTH — SPSO

ALL GAMES ON WGST-AM (640), 96.1-FM, AND BRAVES RADIO NETWORK AFFILIATES



COWETA COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION





ATLANTA BRAVES

Steve Bedrosian, recently chosen chairman of the Coweta County Board of Education (left photo, back row/center) began and ended his career with the Braves.

HELPING HANDS

Steve Bedrosian's Commitment To His Community Runs Deep

BY BRIAN KNAPP

STEVE BEDROSIAN champions the virtues of self-sacrifice and public service through the work he does inside his community. His commitment seems to know no bounds.

For much of the past decade, the 51-year-old former Brave and 1987 National League Cy Young Award winner has served on the Coweta County (Ga.) Board of Education and as an assistant baseball coach at Newnan and East Coweta High Schools. Neither position paid him a dime.

Appointed to the school board in 2000, Bedrosian has since been re-elected twice – once opposed and once unopposed – and has become a pillar of the community. In January, he was chosen as chairman of the Coweta County Board of Education.

"I was honored and humbled they would nominate me," Bedrosian said. "We have a good school system. We're not perfect. We face some cloudy times ahead. There are nights when I go home feeling great and nights when I go home shaking my head."

Bedrosian, who represents district one in Coweta County, roughly 30 miles south of Turner Field, has also served as treasurer and vice chairman on the school board. By the time his current term expires, he will have committed a full decade to the cause, devoting countless hours in an effort to improve the more than 30 schools that fall under the board's umbrella.

"I try to do the best I can," Bedrosian said. "I want the best for my kids and all their peers. I wanted a school system where kids could thrive. Georgia's had a stigma, as far as education is concerned, for a long time. We're trying to raise the bar."

In addition to his responsibilities with the school board, Bedrosian also offers his time and expertise as the pitching coach for the East Coweta High School baseball team in Sharpsburg, Ga. The Indians advanced to the state championship series in 2003 and 2004 – Bedrosian's son, Kyle, was on the pitching staff – but came up short on both occasions. In 2007 and 2008, the team moved into the state quarter-finals before bowing out to perennial power Brookwood, this time with a pair of Bedrosians – Carson and Cameron – on the roster.

"It's giving back. That's what it's all about for me," Bedrosian said. "It's nice being on the field, taking life lessons and passing them on. I look forward to coming to the ballpark."

East Coweta head coach Franklin DeLoach called Bedrosian's contributions to his program invaluable.

"He's really good with kids," DeLoach said. "He takes time with every one of them. It's a privilege and honor to have him with us. You'd never know he played in the big leagues. He works on the field constantly. With some guys, you can't put a shovel or a rake in their hands. He's in the trenches with us."

DeLoach, who guided East Coweta deep into the state playoffs last season, admits he's learned much by watching Bedrosian shape young minds and arms.

"He's always staying very positive with pitchers," DeLoach said. "Even if he gets overly frustrated, he doesn't show it. We might talk about it behind closed doors. That's something I've picked up on as a head coach."

Bedrosian, who was inducted into the Coweta Sports Hall of Fame Feb. 14, draws his knowledge from a deep reservoir of experience.

His major league career spanned 14 years with four teams, including Atlanta – where he spent more than half of his time

(1981-85, 1993-95). A third-round draft pick in 1978, he debuted with the Braves three years later but did not cement his spot on the roster until 1982. During Atlanta's march to a division title that year, he posted an 8-6 record in 64 appearances with 11 saves and a 2.42 earned run average. Outside of closer Gene Garber, he was the team's most effective relief pitcher.

"Bedrock" remained a dependable reliever for two more seasons before the Braves moved him into the starting rotation in 1985. Though he allowed fewer hits than innings pitched and posted a respectable 3.83 ERA, the righthander went 7-15 for a club that lost 96 games. Atlanta traded him to Philadelphia in the off-season, along with Milt Thompson, for Ozzie Virgil and Pete Smith.

"First one's always a shock," Bedrosian said. "I hoped to spend my entire career in Atlanta. I had dinner at Bruce Sutter's house that night, and when I got home, I had [then general manager] Bobby Cox on my answering machine letting me know that my contract had been traded. The next one was from [Phillies general manager] Bill Giles welcoming me to Philadelphia."

The change in scenery and a return to the bullpen revitalized his career. Bedrosian notched 120 saves over the next four seasons and, in 1987, emerged as the premier closer in the National League. He led the circuit with 40 saves and made his only All-Star appearance.

Bedrosian reached the post-season twice more – in 1989 with the Giants and two years later with the World Champion Twins. Seeing the Braves on the other side of the diamond in the 1991 World Series brought back memories.

"It was fun," he said. "I got to come home and play. I had a lot of friends who were still on the Braves. It was a great series, with [John] Smoltz and [Jack] Morris going at it in Game 7."

Bedrosian sat out the entire 1992 season with an injury and returned to the Braves a year later to finish his career.

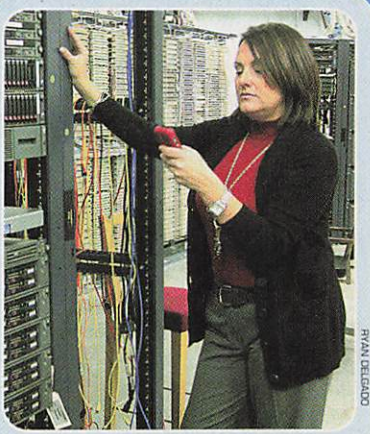
"I called [pitching coach] Leo [Mazzone] and told him I was feeling pretty good," he said. "He, in turn, called [manager] Bobby Cox and [general manager] John Schuerholz, and I got an invite to spring training. I was one of five guys vying for three jobs, and I got one of the jobs and ended up pitching three more years."

Bedrosian, originally from Massachusetts, retired at age 37 following the 1995 season with a 76-79 record, 3.38 ERA and 184 saves, 48th on the all-time list. The married father of five resides in Senoia, Ga.

HOW I MADE IT TO THE MAJORS

SHERRY MILLETTE

DIRECTOR OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY



RYAN DELGADO

BY STEVE FALL

SHERRY MILLETTE started down the path to her current position 13 years ago.

"I took my tax refund and bought myself a home computer," said Millette. "My mom said I was kind of crazy for wasting my money. And I played with that thing and said, 'This is what I want to do. I want to work with computers.'"

Millette now heads the Braves' five-person information technology department. They provide upgrades to systems or programs for the team's employees. Their responsibilities cover anything relating to the network, phones, computers, laptops and PDAs (personal digital assistants or hand-held computers).

Millette and her department get busy right before the season, testing and checking all of Turner Field's systems. They examine everything from the computer in the radar room near the dugout to the bullpen phones, making sure that all function properly. They also maintain three computers in the clubhouse, which Braves players use to check e-mail or to surf the internet. During the season, much of their time is spent "putting out fires," according to Millette. Somebody from their department attends every home game, in case any issues arise.

"Our day can consist of anything from fixing someone's broken mouse to computer upgrades or talking with MLB to do a collaboration on something," said Millette, who grew up rooting for the Red Sox in New Bedford, Massachusetts. "The hours can be rough sometimes. But the people that I work with are just absolutely amazing, and make coming to work a pleasure."

Millette moved to Atlanta 11 years ago from Massachusetts and began working a tech job at Lucent Technologies. Four months later, she landed a position at CNN Center, which needed contractors for an e-mail migration. After that project ended, the IT manager at Turner Sports, Cara Sherlock, hired her for a tech position in 1999. While Millette held that job, she got to know Mike Plant – currently the Braves' executive vice president of business operations – who served as executive vice president of Turner Sports. The connection proved beneficial.

"I heard he was coming over to the Braves, and in passing, I said, 'Hey, if you ever need a tech, give me a call or let me know.' Sure enough, three months later, I got a call from Mike saying they need a tech over here," recalled Millette.

Now entering her sixth season with the Braves, Millette was promoted to her current position in 2007.

"My first advice that I give anybody for any job is it's all in who you know. And that's just making and keeping connections," said the 37-year-old Millette. "My second bit of advice is no matter what you're doing, always treat everybody kindly and the same [way]. If you are working tech, and you're talking to somebody who is low-tech, don't talk down to them."

Millette explained how baseball has been slow to embrace technology. For example, computers and PDAs are not allowed in the dugout.

"Baseball is the good old-fashioned pastime, and technology is that new thing," she said. "And I think there probably is a long way to go to meet in the middle for both of those things."

ALUMNI NOTES

- Braves Hall of Famer **Ralph Garr** (OF, 1968-75) is among the finalists for two other halls of fame - the National College Baseball Hall of Fame and the Grambling (La.) Legends Hall of Fame. This is the first year there's been a "small school" category, where Garr is listed, on the ballot for the college hall located in Lubbock, Tex. Garr is one of 14 finalists for 11 spots in the Grambling shrine.

  Other former Braves on the college ballot are **George Sisler** (1B, 1928-30) in the vintage category, **Tom Paciorek** (OF/1B, 1976-78) in the 1964-77 era, **Oddibe McDowell** (OF, 1989-90) and **B.J. Surhoff** (OF/1B, 2000-02) in 1978-87, and **Mike Kelly** (OF, 1994-95) and **Gregg Olson** (RHP, 1994) in 1988-98.

- **Andres Galarraga** (1B, 1998, 2000) served as a coach for Venezuela in the World Baseball Classic.

- **Dale Murphy** (OF/1B/C, 1976-1990) will speak to hundreds of athletes and coaches at the annual banquet held at the Junior College World Series May 22 in Grand Junction, Colo. The dinner, at the Two Rivers Convention Center, is held the day before the tournament begins. Tickets are $40 per person and go on sale April 1 through the Grand Junction Area Chamber Of Commerce.

- The Padres brought **Greg Maddux** (RHP, 1993-2003) to spring training as a special instructor.

- **Phil Niekro** (RHP, 1964-83, '87) was one of seven Hall of Famers that appeared at the Florida Governor's Baseball Dinner in St. Petersburg Feb. 24. Some 500 fans and 200 representatives of the 16 teams that train in Florida and the 29 minor league teams based in Florida attended the event at Tropicana Field. The dinner also featured a video salute to **Hank Aaron** (OF/1B, 1954-74).

- **Dale Murphy** (OF/1B/C, 1976-1990) was on a panel consisting of seven ethics professionals ranging from businessmen to university professors during a conference on ethics at Brigham Young University Feb. 26-27 attended by professionals from around the country.

- The Marlins gave manager **Fredi Gonzalez** (Coach, 2003-06) a contract extension through 2011.

- Houston's **Mike Hampton** (LHP, 2003-05, 2008) left camp Feb. 16 to get treatment for an irregular heartbeat but returned three days later when it corrected itself.

- **Odalis Perez** (LHP, 1998-2001), who signed a minor league contract with Washington, was released when he failed to report for spring training by the mandatory deadline.

- **Ruben Gotay** (3B/2B, 2008) signed a minor league contract with Pittsburgh.

- **Juan Cruz** (RHP, 2004) signed a two-year contract with Kansas City.

- Cleveland designated **Andy Marte** (3B, 2005) for assignment Feb. 19 and assigned him outright to Triple-A Columbus Feb. 25.

- **Tony Graffanino** (INF, 1996-98) signed a minor league contract with Cleveland.

- **Bobby Cox**, **Phil Niekro** (RHP, 1964-83, '87), **Mark Lemke** (2B, 1988-97) and **Fred McGriff** (1B, 1993-97) were among the participants lined up for the Universal Orlando Resort Celebrity Golfing event at Orlando's Mystic Dunes Golf Club on Mar. 16.

- **Phil Niekro** (RHP, 1964-83, '87) will be among the instructors at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum Fantasy Camp Oct. 13-18 in Cooperstown, N.Y. For information, call (607) 547-0369 or visit baseballhall.org.

- **Elmer Dessens** (RHP, 2008) signed a minor league contract with the Mets.

BIRTHDAYS

APRIL

1ST	PHIL NIEKRO (70)
	WILLIE MONTANEZ (61)
2ND	BILLY SAMPLE (54)
3RD	ALEX GRAMMAS (83)
	HAWK TAYLOR (70)
	MARTY CLARY (47)
	QUILVIO VERAS (38)
4TH	BRAD KOMMINSK (48)
6TH	HAL SCHACKER (84)
	TOMMY GREENE (42)
	BRET BOONE (40)
10TH	FRANK LARY (79)
	BOB WATSON (63)
	LEE LACY (61)
	PETE VARNEY (60)
	KEN GRIFFEY (59)
	MIKE DEVEREAUX (46)
	MARVIN FREEMAN (46)
11TH	SEAN BERGMAN (39)
	MARK TEIXEIRA (29)
12TH	JOHNNY ANTONELLI (79)
	JOSE ALVAREZ (53)
14TH	MARTY KEOUGH (75)
	JAY ALDRICH (48)
	DAVID JUSTICE (43)
	GREG MADDUX (43)
	GREG MYERS (43)
	STEVE AVERY (39)
	KYLE FARNSWORTH (33)
17TH	MARQUIS GRISSOM (42)
18TH	RON SCHUELER (61)
	RICO BROGNA (39)
19TH	SCOTT KAMIENIECKI (45)
20TH	TODD HOLLANDSWORTH (36)
22ND	MIKE BELL (41)
23RD	ANDRUW JONES (32)
24TH	BOB BEALL (61)
	CHIPPER JONES (37)
	WILL CUNNANE (35)
25TH	BOB JOHNSON (66)
	LEW KRAUSSE (66)
	DARREN HOLMES (43)
	BRAD CLONTZ (38)
28TH	PABLO TORREALBA (61)
	JORGE SOSA (32)
29TH	ART KENNEY (93)
	TOM HOUSE (62)
30TH	BOB HENDLEY (70)

ChopTalk
THE OFFICIAL MONTHLY MAGAZINE OF THE ATLANTA BRAVES

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GARY CARUSO, President
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EDITORIAL
EDITOR: Gary Caruso
COLUMNISTS: Jay Busbee, Bobby Cox, Mike Gonzalez, Jason Heyward, Patty Rasmussen, Ken Rosenthal (FoxSports.com), Frank Wren
REPORTERS: Bill Ballew, Jay Busbee, Jon Cooper, Steve Fall, Ray Glier, Melanie D.G. Kaplan, Brian Knapp, Brian Lee, Ryan McNally, Patty Rasmussen, Jon Ross, Clint Williams
PHOTOGRAPHERS: Patty Rasmussen, Carlos Restrepo, Bill Setliff, Allison Shirreffs, Walter Victor, Rodger Wood
CARTOONIST: Johnny Sajem

PRODUCTION
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OFFICE OF PUBLICATION
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EDITOR & PUBLISHER

THE PROFESSOR IS IN

FANS EVERYWHERE should be happy to know that Pete Van Wieren is doing well and is fully adjusted to life after baseball - not that he's forgotten about the Braves, mind you. In fact, you can see him at Turner Field during Opening Night ceremonies April 10... and if you're a really big fan of The Professor (who isn't?), you can catch him again a week later during Opening Night ceremonies for the Gwinnett Braves at their new ballpark.

Until then - and afterwards - the Braves Hall of Fame broadcaster has his days pretty well occupied with babysitting, family activities, charity work and traveling with his wife, Elaine.

"I'm not sure if I'll get to spring training or not. I'm trying to find the days," said Van Wieren in mid-March from his suburban Atlanta home.

Naturally, Van Wieren still monitors what's happening with the team whose games he called for 33 years. With Opening Night fast approaching, it felt like a good time to check in with him to get his views on the team. After all, he didn't get his nickname for making off-the-top-of-the-head observations.

"I like the pitching, but I'm a little concerned about the offense. It's very important that Chipper stay healthy," said Van Wieren.

"They've done a great job on establishing more reliable starting pitching. They've got guys who can eat innings, which was a big problem last year, especially in the second half. They can get 200-plus innings out of (Derek) Lowe and 200-plus out of (Javier) Vazquez. Plus, (Jair) Jurrjens should give them 200 innings this year. (Kenshin) Kawakami is still a wild card, plus they ought to get some production out of (Tom) Glavine, too. It looks encouraging, and the bullpen is shored up.

"They really need (Jeff) Francoeur to bounce back, and they need Garret Anderson to contribute. Run production is the big question mark at this point.

"They're going to be a better club than last year, though. I don't know if they're ready to contend with the Phillies and Mets - we'll see. That's why they play the season. If Francoeur bounces back and (Garret) Anderson produces, then maybe... But this certainly doesn't look anything like the team that went through so many problems last year."

What's particularly interesting and intriguing about Van Wieren's observations is that even though it's a stretch at this point, he can visualize the Braves returning to the success formula they employed for the unprecedented run of division titles from 1991-2005.

"Overall, I'm very encouraged," he said. "I think they're on the right road. Look at the 14-year run of division titles, and the one constant, year after year, was outstanding starting pitching. If that doesn't tell you what the nucleus of a winning team has to be, then nothing does.

"There was a big turnover in everyday players, most of them homegrown, during that stretch. Of course, there was some turnover in pitching, too. But there always seemed to be young position players and strong pitching coming along - and it looks like they're back on that track in both directions. There are a number of position players on the fast track - like Jason Heyward and Freddie Freeman - and they've solidified the starting rotation."

Van Wieren says he'll be "popping in" occasionally at Turner Field, and he also plans to be a regular visitor to Gwinnett Braves games, since the ballpark is close to his home.

"I'm looking forward both to being retired and having time to spend where the schedule is mine and also to following the season closely," he added.

On May 27, he'll be in Birmingham to call the 14th annual Rickwood Classic between the Double-A Mississippi Braves and the Birmingham Barons at 99-year-old Rickwood Field. The event will commemorate the 1982 game between the Atlanta Braves and the Southern League All-Stars.

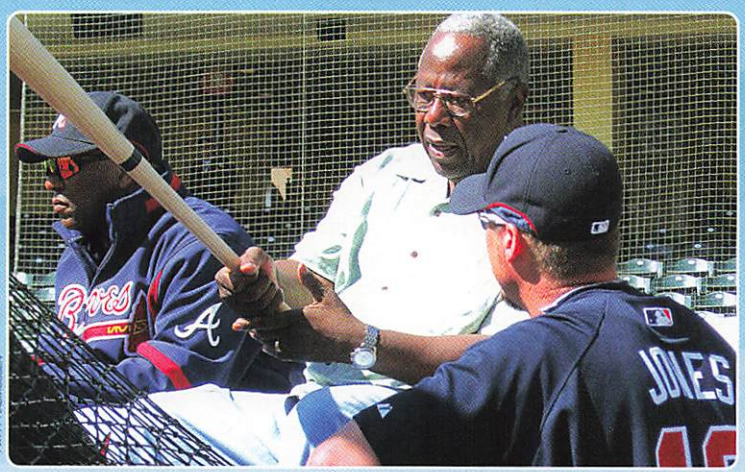
"They'll be wearing the powder blue uniforms," Van Wieren said with delight. "I'm really looking forward to that."

THIS ISSUE OF CHOPTALK was mailed Mar. 19. The May issue will be mailed April 22.

BEYOND BASEBALL

BY **PATTY RASMUSSEN**

With Terry Pendleton (L) close by at spring training, Hank Aaron talks to Chipper Jones about how he gripped the bat when he hit 755 career home runs.

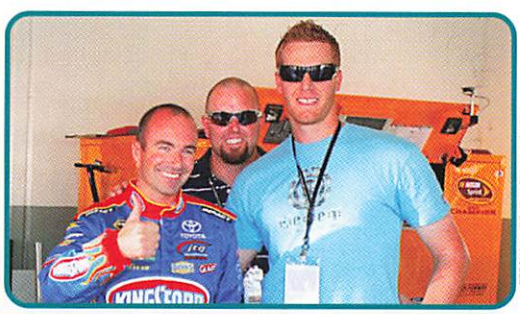


PATTY RASMUSSEN

HAMMER TIME

THERE WERE SEVERAL star-struck players and coaches on hand when Braves icon and Hall of Famer **Hank Aaron** stopped by early spring training workouts on Feb. 19. First he sat behind the batting cage with hitting coach **Terry Pendleton**, who called their visit one of the highlights of his career. Then **Chipper Jones** walked over to talk with Aaron and even brought a bat to ask for a demonstration of how he used to grip it. Finally, Aaron asked Pendleton to call over **Brian McCann**. Later McCann said, "I can't believe (Aaron) called me over to say hello!"

TIM AND KIM HUDSON'S annual Baseball and Birdies Golf Tournament was held Feb. 23 at ChampionsGate Golf Course. Eleven foursomes, comprised of guests and Atlanta Braves players, took part in the tournament. There was a terrific showing from Hudson's teammates. In addition to Hudson, players included **Blaine Boyer**, **Buddy Carlyle**, **Jeff Francoeur**, **Anthony Lerew**, **Boone Logan**, **Brian McCann**, **Charlie Morton**, **Peter Moylan**, **James Parr**, **Jo-Jo Reyes**, **David Ross**, **Clint Sammons**, **Phil Stockman**, **Javier Vazquez** and **Kenshin Kawakami**, accompanied by his interpreter **Daichi Takasue**. The special guest for the event was 13-year-old **Isaac del Valle** of Atlanta, accompanied by his parents, **Antonio** and **Linda**. Isaac, an avid golfer who played with McCann in the tournament, has fought a two-year battle with leukemia and will finish his treatment protocol in late June...



NIKKI KINRADE PHOTOGRAPHY, LLC

NASCAR driver Marcos Ambrose (L-R), Peter Moylan and Phil Stockman meet for an Aussie-fest at the Daytona 500.

Jordan Schafer was spotted at the Feb. 15 Daytona 500 NASCAR race. Also in attendance were Australian pitchers **Peter Moylan** and **Phil Stockman** who had a rooting interest in fellow Aussie, driver **Marcos Ambrose**, with the Waltrip Racing Team. Moylan and Stockman watched the race from pit row, and say they can't wait to go back. "I'd never seen anything like it," said Moylan. "We were walking between the cars when they said, 'Gentlemen, start your engines!'" The pitchers also met members of the Atlanta-based, hard rock band "Sevendust."

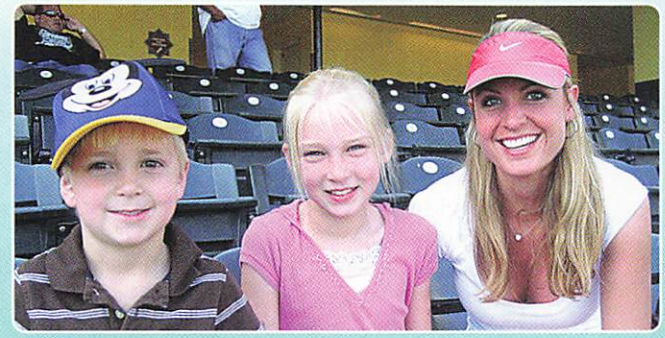
With racing now in their blood, Moylan, Stockman and fellow reliever **Boone Logan** took two turns on Disney's high-speed simulation ride, "Test Track," at Epcot Center on Feb. 23. The 5-minute, nearly one-mile ride took them three stories up before letting them drop downhill, across a bumpy road and through 50-degree banked curves and hairpin turns at speeds up to 60 miles an hour. No wonder all three pitchers said they'd ride Test Track all day long if they could! Their adventure was filmed for ESPN: Baseball Tonight and was broadcast Mar. 1...

Jeff Bennett's haircutting skills will be featured in an upcoming issue of GQ magazine. Bennett is considered the Braves' unofficial "team barber" and has cut hair for **Tom Glavine**, **Brian McCann**, **Martin Prado**, **Gregor Blanco** and **Chino Cadahia**...

ChopTalk Magazine's favorite shuttle astronaut, LTC **Shane Kimbrough**, is penciled in to toss out the first pitch at the June 26 game at Turner Field between the Braves and Boston Red Sox. He will also visit with the team and bring along the Braves jersey he took on the shuttle Endeavor last November (along with a copy of the November CT)...

A group of players and their spouses celebrated the birthdays of **Brian McCann** (Feb. 20) and **Kelly Johnson** and **Casey Kotchman** (both Feb. 22) by going out to dinner. In addition to Brian and **Ashley McCann**, **Kelly** and **Lauren Johnson**, Kotchman and his fiancée, **Erin Krall**, the group included **Jeff** and **Catie Francoeur**, **Blaine** and **Ginsey Boyer**, **Clint** and **Meredith Sammons** and **David Ross** and

FAMILY TIES



PATTY RASMUSSEN

PLENTY OF FAMILY members dropped by workouts, Feb. 18 through 23, including **Brian McCann**'s parents, **Howie** and **Sherry**, **Matt Diaz**'s wife, **Leslee** and son, **Nathan**, 2, **Charlie Morton**'s mother, **Jeanne Pfeilsticker**, and **Derek Lowe**'s wife, **Carolyn** (L), and his daughter, **Taylor** (9), and son, **Tanner** (5). Tanner brought along his dad's old glove in the event a ball made it into the stands. The Lowe family visited Disney's Magic Kingdom and rode the Big Thunder Mountain Roller Coaster, which stalled and stranded them - twice!

his wife, **Hyla**...

Kelly Johnson will be the host of the Prevent Child Abuse Georgia 2009 Celebrity Golf Tournament on June 29 at White Columns Country Club. "Kelly and I are very excited about the PCA golf tournament," said Lauren. "We are happy to become more involved in the Atlanta community and grateful to help out any children in need that we can." For more information, check the PCA website at preventchildabusega.org...

Tim and **Kim Hudson** met former teammates **Pete Orr** and his wife, **Jodi**, and **Ryan Langerhans**, and wife, **Shari**, for dinner on Feb. 22 in Melbourne, Fla., where the Washington Nationals train. Orr and Langerhans both signed minor league contracts with the Nationals in December. The Orrs stayed at the Hudsons' home in Peachtree City, Ga., for a few days on their way to spring training from their home in Ontario, Canada...

Ashley McCann attended the **Britney Spears** Circus Tour show on Mar. 5 at Philips Arena in Atlanta, and pronounced the performance, "Awesome!"...

Jeff Francoeur signed his contract with the Braves then went to Disney World! Francoeur took his wife, **Catie**, to a celebratory dinner at Citircos at the Grand Floridian Hotel at Walt Disney World on Feb. 19...

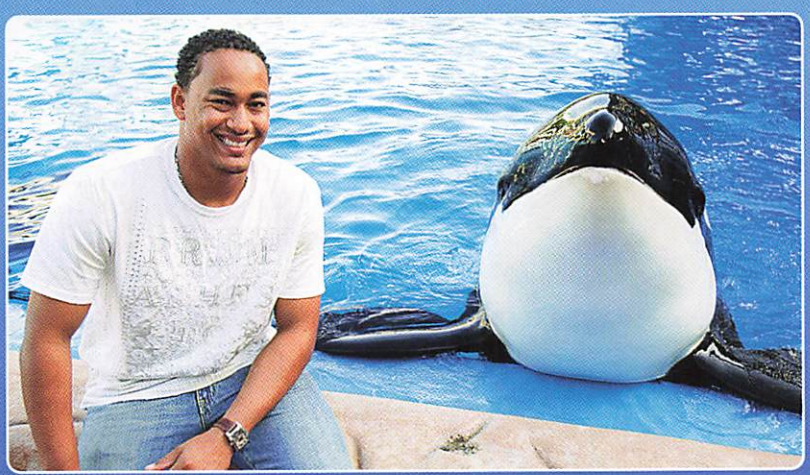
Former Braves pitcher **Chris Hammond** (2002) brought his two sons, **Andy** (12) and **Jake** (10), and two of their friends, **Lane** (12) and **Eric Henderson** (10), to watch workouts and batting practice on Feb. 19 and got the royal treatment. Hammond and the boys received passes enabling them to sit in the dugout, stand on the field, and talk with players. "You look like you could still pitch," said **Bobby Cox** to Hammond as the two men shook hands...

Brian and **Ashley McCann** participated in the Feb. 19 kickoff of 4 Quarters 4 Research, a national campaign to benefit the Rally Foundation. Students are encouraged to collect spare change in zip-top plastic bags in order to "fight cancer one quarter at a time." Interested organizations and schools can visit the Rally Foundation website at rallyfoundation.org for more information about how to become involved...

Kim Hudson and two of her three children, **Kennedie** and **Kade**, toured Disney's Hollywood Studios along with **Blaine Boyer**'s wife, **Ginsey**, on Feb. 18. Tim joined the family later that afternoon at the Magic Kingdom for rides, dinner, and fireworks to finish off the night. Kim, who now serves on the board of directors of the Make a Wish Foundation of Alabama and Georgia, co-hosted a spring styling event on Mar. 12 at **Elie Tahari** Boutique at Phipps Plaza in Atlanta...

Leslee Diaz celebrated her Feb. 16 birthday at Texas de Brazil Churrascaria, a Brazilian style steakhouse, with her husband, **Matt**, and friends **Kelly** and **Lauren Johnson**, **Blaine** and **Ginsey Boyer**, and **Tim** and **Kim Hudson**...

Jeff Francoeur and former teammate, **John Smoltz**, played a round of golf with PGA giant, **Tiger Woods**, on Mar. 4 at Isleworth Country Club.



SPECIAL

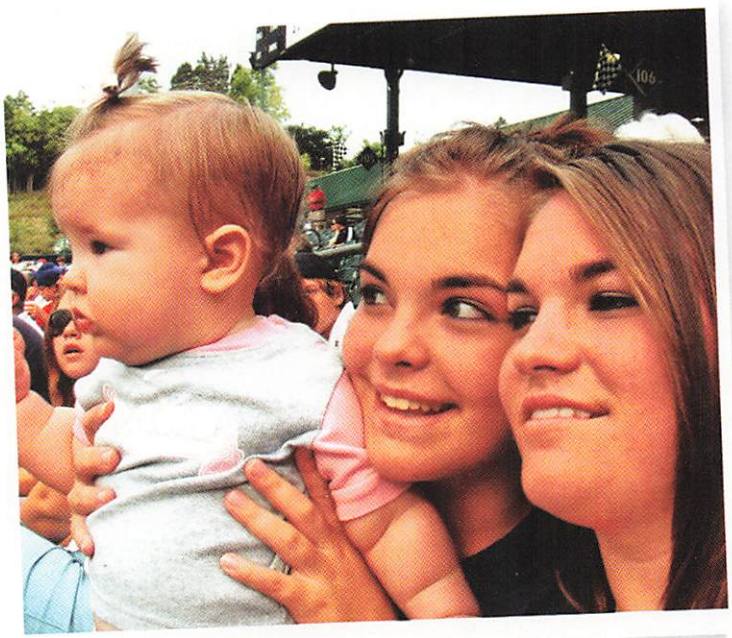
KILLER PITCHER

Jair Jurrjens and his family visited Sea World Orlando, Mar. 2, and Jurrjens demonstrated his bravery by getting up close and personal with Shamu, the trained killer whale who performs at Sea World.

TALKIN' CHOP

LETTERS & PHOTOS FROM OUR READERS

WHETHER YOU'RE HAVING FUN AT TURNER FIELD, EXPERIENCING A CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH YOUR FAVORITE BRAVES PLAYER, OR JUST SHOWING OFF YOUR COLLECTION OF BRAVES STUFF OR TRYING ON YOUR NEW BRAVES SHIRT, WE WANT TO HEAR ABOUT IT AND SEE A PICTURE.



SISTERLY ADVICE

We were unable to make the drive to Atlanta last season. It was the first year we haven't caught a game at Turner Field or Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium since 1995. So, we considered the minor league games we attended as practice for the real thing. Big sisters Kristabelle and Alexandria (R) show Bryanna all the important stuff, like which players are the cutest.

BRYAN & ANDREA HERRON
Cookeville, Tenn.

TEXAS CHOPPERS

I play on the 6U Braves in Houston, Tex. We had a great year and reached the quarter-finals of the playoffs. Our moms and dads support us by waving their tomahawks in the stands. We even have an equipment cart that is hand-painted with "Braves" on it. My dad is our coach, and we read ChopTalk together. When I'm done reading it, I pass it on to my teammates. We are getting ready for our spring season and hope to make it to the World Series - just like the big Braves.

NATHAN BECKER
Houston, Tex.

SHARE YOUR BRAVES FEVER!

WRITE TO US

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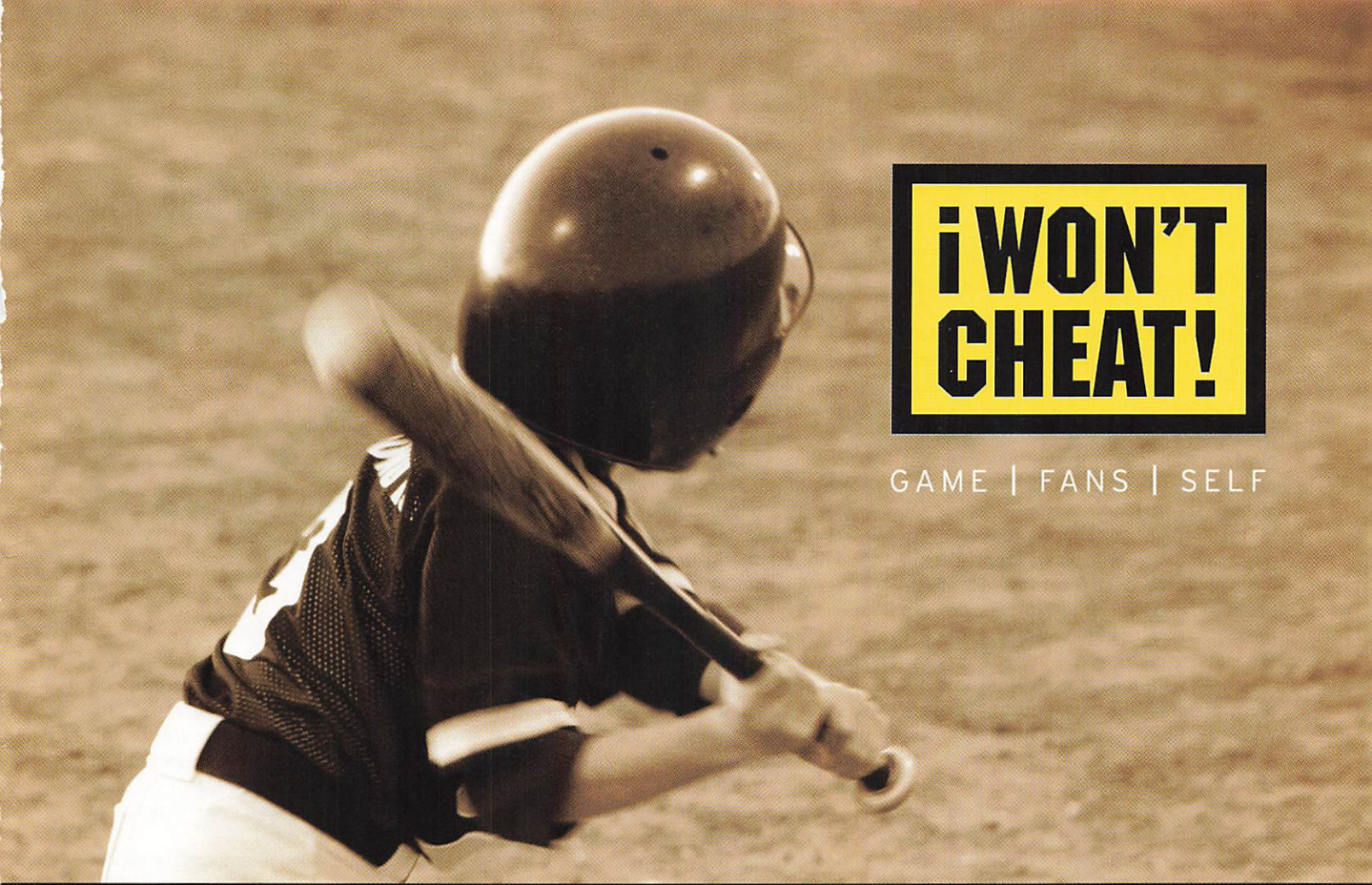

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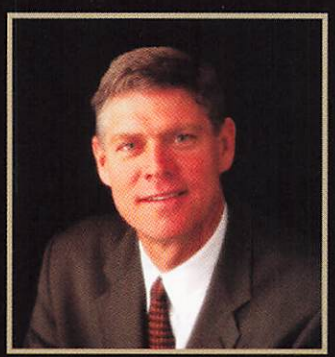

"Youth athletes who feel the pressure to cheat have been damaged the most by the steroid problem. Let's work together to create a drug free atmosphere in sports."

–Dale Murphy

2 TIME NL MVP, ATLANTA BRAVES

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"PROJECT KNUCKLEBALL"

BY PATTY RASMUSSEN

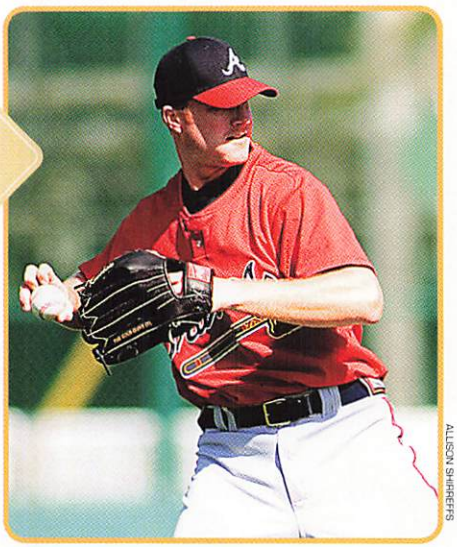
LANCE NIEKRO threw his first live batting practice on Feb. 25, and he threw predominantly knuckleballs. The former first baseman is attempting to re-enter baseball, following in the famous footsteps of his late father, Joe, who passed away in 2006, and his Hall of Fame uncle, Phil, both of whom were renowned for their knuckleball and won a combined 539 games - the all-time record for brothers.

"I feel great, and I'm progressing every day," said Lance, who was a first baseman for the San Francisco Giants in 2003, '05-07 before signing a minor league contract with the Braves during the winter. "I can't expect to be perfect."

Lance was invited to minor league camp and worked on the back fields at Disney's Wide World of Sports complex, almost anonymous to everyone except the occasional reporter and those in the Braves organization who parked their golf carts on the paths next to Field 5 to watch him throw. The first time out he threw 30 pitches, two of which ended up in the dirt in front of the catcher.

"The catchers really help me," said Niekro. "They'll tell me, 'It's moving a lot today,' or let me know if it's spinning too much."

Phil Niekro spent 10 days in Orlando during spring training, not just to counsel Lance on his mechanics, but also to give Braves coaches a better idea of how to work with Lance when he wasn't around.



ALLISON SHERBERT

Former San Francisco first baseman Lance Niekro works on throwing the knuckleball in minor league camp, where he received instruction from his uncle, Phil Niekro.

"We've all been talking to (Lance) as he's been throwing, asking, 'What has Phil been talking to you about, what are you working on, what are you supposed to be doing mechanically, and what are we looking for?'" said Kurt Kemp, the Braves' director of player development. "We don't have experience developing a knuckleball pitcher."

But Kemp is optimistic about the Niekro knuckleball project.

"If anyone is going to make it work, it would be Lance," said Kemp. "He's a great kid with not just great genetics and a long-time understanding of the pitch, but he knows what it's like to be in the major leagues."

"Anyone can learn the knuckleball as long as they want to learn it," said Phil. "It's not something that most pitching coaches teach, so in some ways you become your own pitching coach. You learn from the struggles, what works and what doesn't."

Thus far, Lance is pleased with his work. He throws a bullpen session and then takes a day off, then throws two days of live batting practice and takes another day off. He pointed out that knuckleball pitchers have a different routine.

"There's no set-in-stone program," he said. "It's really been up to me as to whether or not I'll throw one day or the next. The good thing is that knuckleball pitchers don't usually have arm or back soreness. If you're sore, you're probably doing something wrong!"

His biggest challenge is getting used to a different view of the game - from the pitcher's mound.

"I've always played around with the knuckleball," he said. "But once you're on the mound, it means something and you have to throw strikes. I really think I can do this. I know I have the best teacher in the world in Phil."

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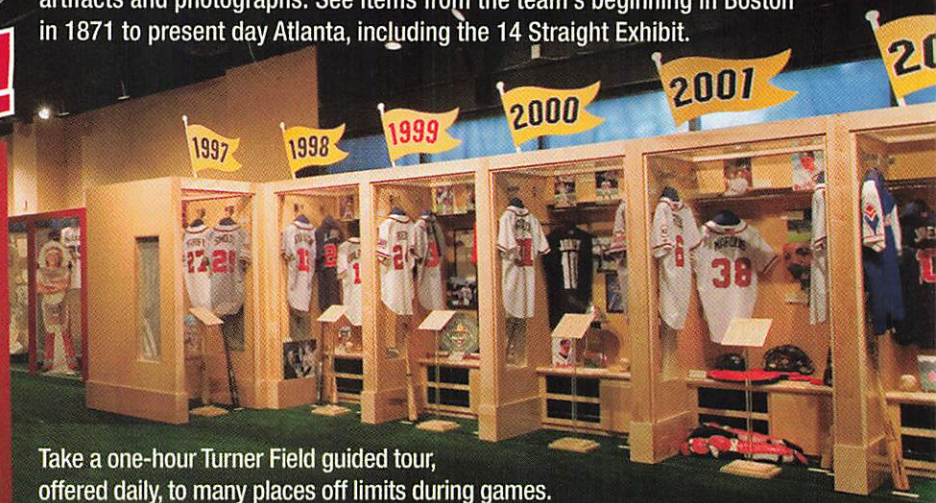

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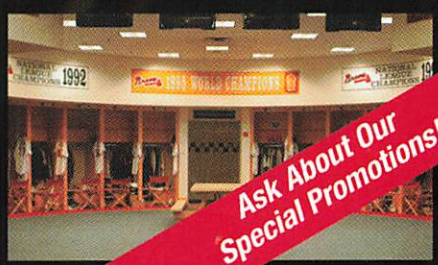

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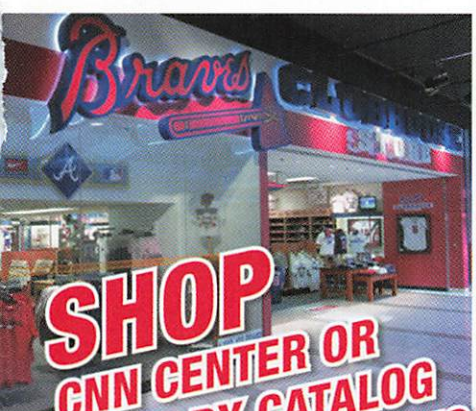

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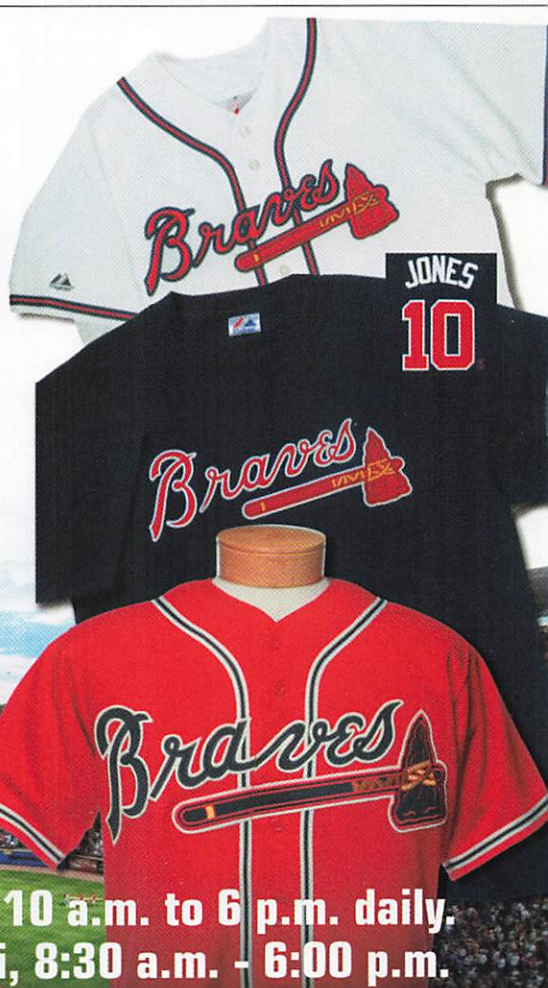

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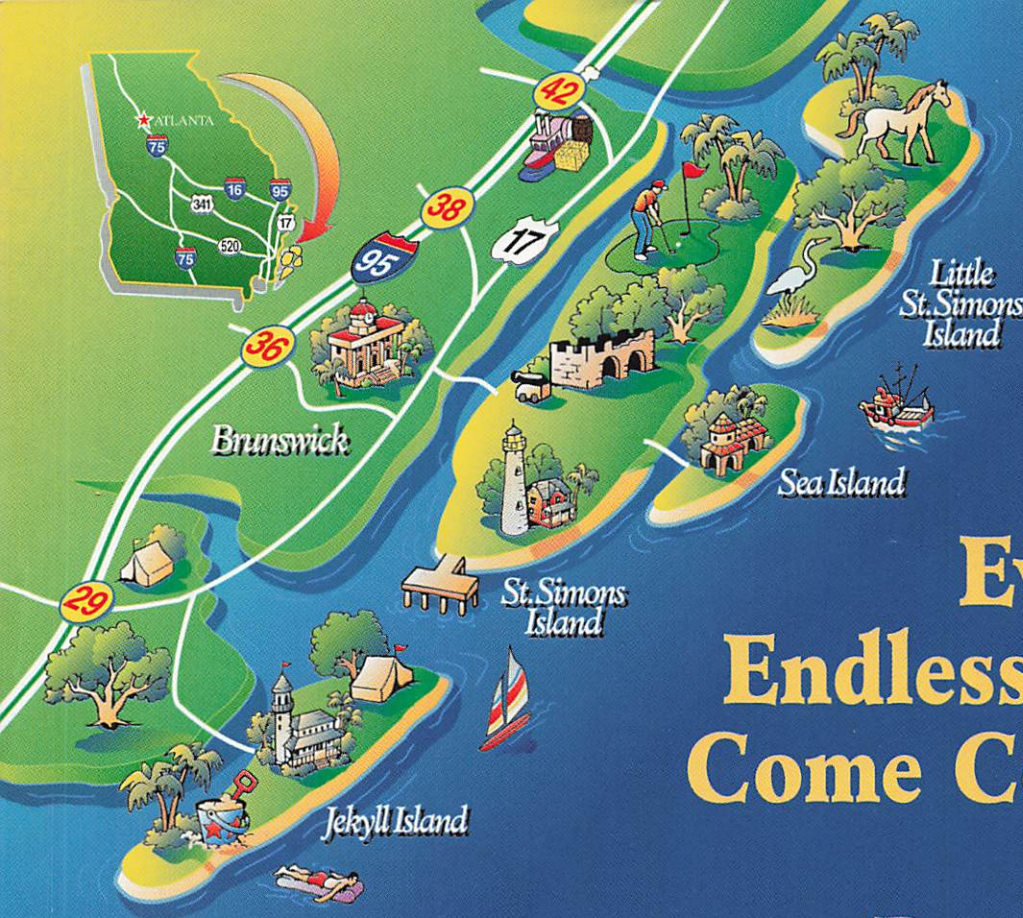

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